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The Spear Grinner is not a novel. It is, in the words of its author 'a Fiction'—an epic fiction, where the time between events is telescoped and where people and things are identified by almost ritual attributes. The hero is Hector Reed, an Australian who was the only applicant for a vacancy as an administrative officer in a gangster-ridden corner of a British colony in Africa.

When Reed resigns he has tasted virtually everything Africa can offer, from acute physical terror to seduction on the coffee estates. He has been constantly beset by the Ostrich, the district commissioner's incredible Public school African office boy, who has shown him the ropes and much of the ring too; he has also become entangled with Kangai, his beautiful, high-cheeked, slant-eyed Athene of a housekeeper. She might well be the Africa with whom every European flirts and from whom none escapes unscathed.

Hector Reed is a hero of epic proportions and, though we never discover whether his wound was mortal, we watch all Africa conspire to undermine his laconic resistance to shock. It begins with a hair-raising ride in the Ostrich's chariot of an automobile; its ends in bowel-freezing horror.

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by

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MONDAY

Hector Reed huddled in his passenger seat and ate pieces from the corner of his salmon-pink airline ticket. Occasionally he chewed at his dictionary of vernacular. But what kept sending him back to the salmon-pink was the dictionary's first proposition.

"Muga mono," said the dictionary, "means hearty greetings; or a big thorn tree; or a powerful witchdoctor (depending on intonation)."

In this vernacular it was often the melody that carried the meaning.

The porthole near Reed was glazed with concave perspex which made the watery surface of the earth appear closer. Dabs of cloud beneath the aircraft looked like flecks of fluff, resting on their own shadows on the lapis-lazuli ocean beneath. The aircraft was descending. As it passed over the coastline fishermen could be seen mending sting-ray spears beside slim-hewn craft which were drawn up on the beaches. Hector Reed closed his dictionary of vernacular and ingested another round of salmon-pink.

The aircraft swooped inland and the continent swelled to

meet it. For an instant a herd of impala were seen bouncing above the thorn trees like fleas in a hairbrush.

"Barley-sugar, sir," said the air hostess, "by courtesy of the airline."

"That's right," said Hector Reed.

Away to the north the silhouette of Ol Skoni mountain floated above the rippling heat of the grazing plains as transparent as a courteous deed in a mercenary world.

Hector Reed lifted the flap of his leather satchel and peered at the dark recess within where the oily gleam of a virgin forty-four revolver winked at him. He flicked the pivoted chambers with a finger and the forty-four clicked. He snapped back the ejector rod which lay along the barrel. Then he closed the leather satchel and gripped it under his arm.

Ol Skoni mountain was his destination. It stood in a district called Jamskoni where the inhabitants were now recovering from a recent uprising.

As the aircraft touched down on the tarmac Reed drummed his fingers nervously on the metallic bulge in his satchel and repeated the words "muga mono" several times quietly with varying intonations. He unlatched the safety belt. The air hostess bade him a public-relations farewell and he stepped down the ramp.

The sun's vertical rays fell heavily upon him and perspiration pressed out all over his body. His heartbeat could be felt in his face. Soon the aircraft continued its flight and Hector Reed became a diminutive speck on an ocean of ground which was arid to a remarkable extent and wind-polished. The air, like the taste of wattle bark, dried out his mouth almost immediately. After the perfumed accoutre-

ments and detergent-scoured fabrics of the airline passengers the present surroundings seemed absolutely odourless. His footsteps crackled loudly across the black tarmac.

Beyond the tarmac's edge a few thorn trees sucked meagre sustenance from the dust and a sprawling baobab groped desperately at the sky. Farther out a filthy band of white-headed vultures and marabou storks flaunted the obscenity of their naked necks as they pecked the anus out of a dead camel. To mark the edge of Jamskoni district there was a primitive cantilever barrier across the murram road and a notice in Arabic characters which warned of hardship and trouble. Disease and deprivation.

Twisted among the shady roots of the baobab was a shrunken old man in a bile-coloured blanket. He was mumbling to himself. A few white goats pottered among the thorn trees and in a small depression eight or nine women the colour of tarnished copper were digging a shallow soak. Their skin had been rubbed with red earth to make them socially acceptable and their heads were shaven to show they were unmarried.

As the soak deepened, the sand which they were throwing up with their hands changed from flour-dry to dough-moist. Butterflies added their trembling colours to the edge of the soak. Ants wandered in from the dust plain to reconnoitre a new nest in the growing mound of moistness.

Hector Reed listened to the old man's mumbling for a time, but gained no insight into the accumulated wisdom of centuries residing in the wrinkled skull. All the philosophy and experience of an ancient people seemed to be there at Reed's disposal but he simply could not turn the pages of his dictionary expertly enough. Narrow-eyed, he

gazed across the road barrier into Jamskoni district where mirages drifted waveringly on the haze.

About fifteen miles away the land rose steeply. In the middle distance a thin column of smoke floated indistinctly upwards and deteriorated into smudgy blobs. Reed peered intently at these as though he were trying to read a message. Soon the column of smoke drew nearer and was seen to emanate from the rear of a shining automobile.

The sun glinted on it as it approached and made it flash like flames in a fire. In less than a quarter of an hour the automobile changed from a distant campfire to a nearby projectile which moved in a tightening curve. The last yards of the journey were achieved in a controlled sideslip, rather in the manner of an ice skater who kills his speed by turning his blades sideways.

In the swirling eddies and rolling dust clouds created by the sideslip the driver could have been mistaken for Satan himself, among the scalding mists of Hades. He was gaunt and bony with eyes bloodshot to a luminous crimson and teeth sharpened into tusks. He wore a sharply-pressed businessman's suit and a public-school necktie. He was as black as paint.

"I say," cried Hector Reed who seemed excited by the urgent arrival. "Can I help you at all?"

"On the contrary, old bean," said the well-dressed Satan. "I am the District Commissioner's office boy and I am here to take you to Jamskoni administrative centre."

"Oh, I see," said Reed. And he did some more drumming on his satchel.

Despite the civilized clothes and the tailored accent the

office boy's face had an intricately embroidered scar on one cheek and a way of smiling that could be called savage. Hector Reed gripped his leather satchel more tightly and strode forward while the office boy leaned across from the steering wheel and clicked open the side door; on the nearside.

"Sit up in front," suggested the well-dressed office boy, smiling savagely. "Hope you don't mind being driven by a bloody wog."

"What's that?" said Reed and held his breath.

The other fiddled negligently with the steering wheel and then selected a few quiet gears as the automobile left the road barrier, sheared away through the scalding mists and gathered speed over the flat grey dust of Jamskoni district. While the acceleration was pressing into Reed's backbone the office boy dangled out one bony hand and murmured as Reed grasped it:

"How do you do? My people just call me the Ostrich. One gets used to it."

"Is that so?" said Hector Reed. "I am just a kookaburra myself."

"But I am serious, old man. I am a candidate in the democratic elections and the ostrich is my campaign symbol."

"My name is Reed. Hector Reed."

"Very well, Mr. Reed."

"That is fine, Mr. Ostrich."

The Ostrich clicked into overdrive and the automobile cruised steadily at ninety on the dry bed of the ancient sea, with a column of dust pouring out behind. A stuffy secretary bird shed its officiousness and fled in panic. The

Ostrich moved the steering wheel calmly to avoid the bird and the tyres gave a long squeak in the deep dust.

"I suppose life can be pretty tedious around here," said Reed, looking back at the outraged huffiness of the secretary bird. "Tedious indeed," agreed the Ostrich. "Except, of course, for the uprising."

At mention of the uprising Hector Reed withdrew his virgin forty-four revolver from the leather satchel and held it in one hand. He had used up a good deal of mental mileage in conjuring it through customs points and now was the time to benefit from the effort.

The road climbed steeply from the flat grey dust up to turfy alpine uplands where here and there against the saturated green there was a splash of wild violets and bitter gentians or a brilliant jet of aloes, called red-hot pokers. A tan-coloured topi with streamlined horns galloped off the road, accompanied by a frantic scraping of hooves and a clattering of pebbles. The air became flavoured with the dung of herbivores.

Soon the road levelled off and meandered through the curves of the nine-thousand-foot contour. On the smooth surface the large automobile maintained high speed and at intervals it tunnelled into layers of cloud.

Each layer of cloud was grey and cold and each patch of sunshine was bright and hot and the rapid transition from one to the other was not unsettling but positively comforting. Hector Reed leaned loosely back against the upholstery and enjoyed a rippling orchestration of thermal sensations. A group of great white egrets standing on a carpet of crowfoot grass flashed past like newspapers in a gale.

At a mile a minute the great automobile drove on to a roadway which had recently been soaked with rain. Here the smooth surface was composed of red lava dust. When dry the lava dust formed a reliable surface, but when wet it formed a low-grade lubricant.

Now a touch of brakes on such a surface would make an automobile lose grip on the road. It would tend to drift out of control like a penny on an ice rink and few would be the drivers who could regain frictional contact with the roadway once this drifting occurred.

What the driver had to do was delicately adjust the revolutions of his wheels to match the speed of the drifting. For this delicate work the footbrake was too severe. What the driver needed was the precise judgment of a watchmaker in a situation more suited to a lion tamer.

When the office boy's foot strayed towards the brake pedal Reed touched him immediately on the knee with the forty-four revolver and earnestly begged him to slow slowly.

"Without brakes, you know."

The Ostrich shouted encouragement at himself in tortured vernacular which came out in painful lumps between spasms of effort that made him stifle his breath. His joints popped and the stringy sinews along his bony wrists played like piano wires as he wrestled through the elongated seconds. He spun the steering wheel in the way that a juggler would spin a plate and managed to offset most of the automobile's impulsive sideslips. He played the accelerator with an ear to the tone of the engine and kept in a gear too high for normal circumstances.

All this time the automobile moved at a velocity that

decreased far too slowly. Occasionally granite outcrops like giant's molars sailed past in the wake and occasionally nothing sailed past except fresh air in vertical thousand-foot draughts.

It was no good pretending that the automobile shot forward in a straight line—the tyre tracks looked like strands of a rope spliced by a madman. It meandered and swung and Hector Reed swayed from side to side with it. It was while moving sideways along the crown of the road, taking a lot of mottled red mud on the polished *duco*, that it slowed dramatically. The rain-soaked surface here was older with a frail dry crust formed by the sun; consequently the margin of frictional contact had broadened.

Hector Reed released all the compressed air in his lungs while the Ostrich drove with concentration to the last inch of the skewed trajectory. Parked on the crown of the road the automobile now aimed its nose point-blank at a granite wall. Its boot protruded a few inches over a steep drop.

As soon as the situation was safe the Ostrich stopped driving. Only then did he screw up his demoniacal face in pain.

"Do you mind if I drive?"

The Ostrich did not curse much. Merely a few weak words wrenched out in local vernacular. He rolled up a sharply-pressed trouser leg and felt his knee cap to determine whether it was shattered. The knee cap was unmarked except for the neat indentation from the foresight of Reed's forty-four.

"You drive, old bean," he then agreed with a wide grin full of sharpened teeth, "and I'll hold the forty-four."

Hector Reed drove all right and the automobile did not get above thirty all the way to Jamskoni administrative centre. The roadway snaked down from the nine-thousand-foot contour through a rotting rain forest where old-men's beard lichens enmeshed the suffocating trees. Somewhere in the stinking tangle an ibis was shouting hah hah hah like the sound effects of a television audience. The roadway slipped out into blinding sunlight again and then down over the lip of a volcanic crater.

"You miss so much when you pile on the speed," said the Ostrich.

"I'll worry about the speed," said Hector Reed.

The administrative centre was in the crater of the dead volcano. A set of whitewashed stone cells contained all the files and clerks necessary for the governing of a third of a million people; they formed the circumference of a circle outside which lay the streets and alleys of the commercial sector. Inside the circle was an area covered mainly by an open-air market. On market days the work cells of the administrative centre were drab and uninviting indeed compared with the colour and activity of the market.

It was market day today. The cess barrier which guarded the market place was manned by tribal policemen in strawberry sweaters who collected taxes on produce as it was carried in and as Hector Reed drove up, one of them came forward to lift it away. On his shoulders the policeman wore leather protectors so that he could slope his regimental shotgun without wearing out his strawberry sweater.

He had khaki shorts starched and ironed and thin wiry legs driven into infantryman's boots. Upon the black coir

mat which grew on his skull he wore a round khaki tarboosh, starched and ironed. The loops of the tribal policeman's ear lobes were about nine inches long. It seemed that the sun had cured those ropy lobes to the consistency of a stockwhip; they were coiled over the top of the ears like mooring lines over bollards. This conformed with Queen's printed regulations. Ears at all times would be worn folded.

Hector Reed revved up the Ostrich's automobile. The tribal policeman looked at him sharply and he stared levelly back through the windscreen.

"Don't worry," said the Ostrich. "He just wants to remember your face. He doesn't wish to shoot people on his own side."

"Good heavens."

Meticulously he gave the tribal policeman full face and profile as the automobile crept through the cess barrier into the crowded market.

Vendors in the market were mostly women. A few of them had skulls completely shaven to show that they were unmarried but those with babies had left a tuft of hair to show that they were no longer unmarried.

The handful of male vendors concentrated on masculine wares such as black snuff. Honey beer and hemp cigarettes. And bark for brewing. But the women sold various grains and vegetables. The customers were coffee-and-pigeon-pea-farmers from the terraced slopes of Ol Skoni mountain. There were cattle herders also from the hot grazing areas, with here and there a sprinkling of the tall naked red men who came from the mirage country beyond Jamskoni's boundaries.

At walking pace they drove through the crowded market and parked on the cement square in front of the club.

"You can lunch here, old boy," said the Ostrich. "I'll pick you up afterwards."

"Aren't you coming in? I'll buy you a drink."

"As a matter of fact I usually eat down the street a bit. I have a sort of shop, you know. We do the dry cleaning for most of the administrative officers. That's why they all look so crackerjack. Hah."

"But surely, as a Member of Parliament, you could have a drink at the club."

"As a matter of fact, old boy," said the Ostrich, "I am not a Member of Parliament yet. Neither am I a member of the club."

"Well. I am no member myself."

"Oh yes you are, you know."

Hector Reed walked up the polished granite steps on to the club veranda while the Ostrich took the large automobile away through the crowded market. On the club veranda were several smartly-attired administrative officers resting horizontally on long cane chairs with tall glasses at their elbows and little tables under their feet.

"Good day," said Reed by way of generic salutation and he cleared his throat.

None of the administrative officers seemed to notice him. He tiptoed through into the dining-room where ghostly stewards in embroidered smocks and red waistcoats gave him lonely lunch of marbled boiled beef and suet pudding.

The bill of fare was typewritten on a card so that each

dish was numbered. Reed ordered lunch by calling the number beside each choice of dish. The system was designed to help newcomers who could not converse fluently in vernacular but even so the numbers had to be called in the coastal dialect which functioned in Jamskoni district as a free language.

Hector Reed did not try to establish contact with the administrative officers again. He stepped down from the club veranda and walked across the market into the labyrinth of streets and alleys outside the circle of work cells. The shops in this quarter mostly had Hindoo names over their entrances even though some of the proprietors looked like local inhabitants. Thickly pasted along the walls of business houses were political posters appealing to citizens to vote for the lion or the aeroplane or the ostrich at the democratic elections. Along one street was the debris left by flying masonry and a damaged tear-gas container which could have been used at a political meeting. The Ostrich's large glittering automobile was parked in this street. Outside a shop where the signboard said: "Premji Drycleanery."

"I suppose lunch was a bit grim, old man," said the Ostrich, suddenly appearing from the Premji Drycleanery. But don't worry."

"I am not worried."

"In future you can take your meals in your own house."

The Ostrich was even better dressed now than before lunch. He had changed into a fresh collar with the tie of an Oxford double blue. His shoes were hand-stitched golfers and his jacket was Harris tweed with a respectable hint of rust about it.

"I am not very good at running a house."

"Your house is the least of your worries, old man. All you need is a couple of wives to help you."

"Oh?"

"But that can wait. Just now I have to issue you with a gun and a vehicle."

The gun in question lay on the back seat of the Ostrich's car. It looked like a trench mortar but it was only a six-o-six. The slug it threw was as heavy as a Yorkshire pudding.

"This gun eliminates all your problems, old chap," said the Ostrich with a frightening grin like a spiky picket fence. "It hits with a force of about eight tons."

Hector Reed put a packet of six-o-six rounds in his pocket and when he sat in the front seat of the automobile they anchored him to the upholstery. The Ostrich drove him out through the market past the cess barrier and up the side of the volcanic crater.

The dwellings of administrative officers were scattered up the crater's slopes in such a way that the more important officers lived closer to the centre. Reed could judge his own status in the official hierarchy from the fact that his dwelling had a view which included the curvature of the earth and when he looked down at the administrative centre he could hardly see it for heat haze.

A bush vehicle stood waiting for him on an etiolated patch of the vast lawn which surrounded his house. The house itself was of hand-worked grey syenitic stone with gleaming parquet flooring, a fireplace like a Roman bridge, plenty of glazing and servants' quarters tucked away behind flowering corkbark trees. Flashes of colour flickered

inside the house where a maidservant named Kangai fluttered around in a menial's long gown of strident green.

The Ostrich gave Reed a heavy bunch of keys.

"There is a key for every door and every cupboard," he explained. "But be careful. This district is crawling with cut-throats and gangsters."

Hector Reed used a key to open the front door and then, rather pointedly, left the bunch hanging in the keyhole. Perhaps he was getting nettled by the Ostrich's incessant directives. Anyway he laid the six-o-six on the mantelshelf over the fireplace and put the rounds with the forty-four in the bathroom.

Without being asked, the maidservant Kangai brought beer in glasses a yard high. Well. In that heightened atmosphere they looked a yard high.

"Look here, old man," said the Ostrich as he seized a glass. "This is damned white of you, what?"

"Cheers," growled Reed. He frowned momentarily at the maidservant Kangai who was standing waiting with an uncertain air.

The mantelshelf where Reed had put the six-o-six was twenty inches broad. It was not fixed to the top of the fireplace but lay loosely on a couple of brackets. The top surface of the mantleshelf resembled an Arab door for it was bumpy with dozens of brass nail heads arranged in a geometrical pattern; the under surface was jagged with dozens of nail points. Each point protruded four inches and had been filed to an exaggerated sharpness.

The maidservant Kangai was looking at Reed with shifty eyes which were barely distinguishable in the slanting

slits between smooth eyelids. Her high cheekbones made her look as though she had known starvation somewhere in her young life. And the long folds of her green gown disguised nothing of the prime condition of her neatly architectured flesh. Reed looked sternly back at her and her eyelids closed completely. She looked down at the flimsy thongs of her household sandals.

"This woman in the house, what about her?"

"She is an orphan," said the Ostrich. "She has nowhere else to go."

One could see she was an orphan all right. No one had pierced her ear lobes and dragged them out of shape. No one had knocked out her front teeth in case she got lockjaw. In Jamskoni district she looked like the zenith of disrespectability.

"Well. We cannot have her here," said Reed.

Kangai was twisting herself into a caricature of humiliation.

"She was born with teeth, you understand," said the Ostrich, by way of explanation. "So naturally no respectable person would have any association with her."

"It's not respectability I am worried about, it's just plain fornication."

Kangai giggled once or twice loudly, then she cut off short as though the lid had fallen back into place on a bubbling cooking pot.

"Can she speak English?" asked Reed in a low voice.

"Not a word. My family have always looked after her. She used to work down in the Premji Drycleanery but she says she wants to have a house of her own."

"But this is my house," snarled Reed. "Not hers."

The Ostrich was kicking distractedly at a hollow elephant foot which held some kindling near the fireplace.

"If you take my advice, old chap, you will shave this thing regularly. The hair never stops growing, you know."

"Come on, now," said Reed. "What are we going to do?"

"If you take my advice, old chum, you will get up through that trapdoor regularly. If you don't clean up the bat droppings in the ceiling the weight will eventually crush you."

He pointed with his beer glass up at the trapdoor which fitted into the ceiling. It was close to the wall near the fireplace. Shelves had been fitted into the wall to act as rungs of a ladder to reach it.

With his civilized tan slacks and savagely bloodshot eyes the Ostrich stood on a zebraskin on the polished parquet before the Roman bridge of a fireplace and drank another yard of cold beer. Then he climbed back into his large shining automobile.

"I don't know what this is all about," snapped Reed. "You come into my house and drink my beer and tell me what to do. After all, you are only the office boy around here."

"If you have any complaints," grinned the Ostrich, "just let me know. By the way. The beer's on me. Merely a gesture of welcome, you know." Then, as he was driving off he added: "After all, we don't get many television-set salesmen applying to be administrative officers in Jamskoni."

The automobile disappeared and Hector Reed strode over to his bush vehicle. He noted that the canopy was

tattered. The engine was clapped out and the self-starter was unreliable. He turned the engine over by rolling down the slope of the crater in top gear until it fired. He drove on down to the administrative centre and parked outside the largest whitewashed work cell where the sign said: DISTRICT COMMISSIONER.

Inside his office the District Commissioner stood behind a low desk and dealt with a heap of well-mauled grey cardboard files. His spectacles were presbyopic. He took them off to deal with the file which had Hector Reed's name on it. By the rumpled look of his tangled eyebrows and the sag in his cheeks it was evident that Reed's arrival in Jamskoni had inspired him with no enthusiasm at all.

"I see that you used to sell television sets for a living?" he said.

"That is correct, sir," answered Reed.

The District Commissioner was absent-mindedly playing with a razor-sharp paper knife. Without looking he held the fingers on one hand splayed flat on his desk and he was thrusting the paper knife repeatedly in between the fingers so that it stood upright on its point.

"What happened? Did you become bankrupt?"

"Not at all, sir. I was moderately successful."

The commissioner ceased thrusting the paper knife at his fingers long enough to glance at Reed's cardboard file.

"I suppose you know the work of an administrative officer is sometimes dangerous."

"Yes, sir."

"The office boy thought the fact of your being Australian was important."

"The office boy's influence seems to reach everywhere."

The paper knife clattered on to the low desk and the file was flapped shut. The District Commissioner screwed up one corner of his mouth into what was either a smile or toothache.

"He might be our representative in Parliament after the democratic elections. In any case, he is a damned useful office boy."

One wall of the office was papered with contoured survey maps so arranged that they formed a vast diagram of the whole district. The conventional signs stood out in precise detail except in one cobwebby corner where Jamskoni district stretched away into hazy desert and thick dust obliterated the edges. The cobwebby corner was in the north-east where a good deal of squabbling occurred between herders over boundaries of grazing areas. It was quite possible that relations between rival herders up there depended somewhat on the length of the office boy's feather duster.

"Now. Here is your work," said the commissioner briskly stepping away from his low desk and swinging his arm in an exaggerated gesture at the wall map of Jamskoni district. "And the sooner you learn it the better."

The District Commissioner spent the end of that afternoon prodding at parts of the wall map with a sunburnt finger and describing the peoples, the religions, the animals, the climates, the crops, the politics, and the languages of Jamskoni district. When approaching darkness gave him a chance of respite from the toils and drudgeries of the day's responsibilities he cursed impatiently.

"Never miss an opportunity to learn more about your

district," he said as Hector Reed peered at him through the thickening dusk. "You will be called upon to judge people's actions according to their own traditions and not according to your own upbringing."

"Of course, sir." Reed scratched his head.

Later in the darkness Reed coaxed his bush vehicle up the steep side of the volcanic crater to his dwelling. He went into the living-room. Moss-green drapes had been drawn across a long louvred window at one end. A fire crackled in the fireplace. Plates and cutlery lay on a checkered tablecloth. A discreet hiss came from the pressure lamps as they spread a soft yellowness from beneath silken lampshades. Grey rags of mountain mist rolled over the house. Kangai's sandals clip-clopped stealthily across the polished parquet.

She had changed her menial gown for a saree tightly wound to emphasize every swelling of her body. The lamplight poured reflections like molten butter down the graceful arm which her saree left bare and the red pigment on her lips flared delicately against the date-blue colour of her high cheeks.

"Muga mono," said Hector Reed and she pulled back the corners of her lips into a smile that scarcely revealed the milk-white cat's teeth within.

Hector Reed sat cross-legged on the zebra skin rug and crouched forward so that the fire could drive the chill from his hand-woven safarishirt. He gulped at the saliva in his mouth once or twice for the warmed air held a promise of venison roasted in sunflower-seed oil. Kangai set a beaker of iced brandy beside his knee. Then she cleared the table and set a picnic on the rug.

There was a young cob of sweet corn sprinkled with grated pepper. Roast with sweet potatoes. Broken lumps of Gruyère cheese with slick black olives and almonds baked in their shells. And a bowl of percolated coffee which made Reed jump with delight.

"Not bad. My word."

Hector Reed ate neatly and with obvious concentration. When Kangai knelt to clear away the picnic he moved his hand across the double swelling of her sareed seat. The tip of her light-pink tongue appeared within the circle of red pigment but she uttered no sound. Her body straightened and Reed could feel the controlled power that gave her gracefulness. She stood upright and his hand was left behind her knee. For a time he seemed to consider the groove of warmth he found there.

At last Reed shook his head slightly and scrambled to his feet with no more than a muted rheumatic pop or two from the sockets where his pelvis held his femurs. He pivoted in a dance-turn like a television lover but Kangai was already clip-clopping away across the polished parquet. As he moved to follow he could hear the rear door closing and Kangai's key turning from the outside. He rubbed his stiff joints a little and sat down again.

For more than two hours he stared into the fire. The house was silent except for the regular drip of mountain mist condensing on the eaves outside and the ear-lulling hiss of the pressure lamps inside. Away in the damp distance a hyrax twittered and Reed shivered.

He extinguished the pressure lamps and went into the bedroom. The drapes had been drawn here but a three-quarter moon occasionally struck through the rolling mist

and filtered its shaft through the fabric which screened the windows. He stripped and went to bed.

At four minutes past two a hand closed over the bunch of keys hanging in the front-door keyhole and they gave a clink-clink. Reed's eyes jumped open but the rest of his body remained paralysed. Above the ceiling the almost imperceptible squeaks of bats made indelible streaks on the silence.

Outside the house the last of the mist had dissipated and a hard moon burned the clipped lawns ash-white. Silently Reed arose and moonlight projected the fabric pattern of the curtain across his shivering skin. He stood motionless. The keys had stopped clinking. The reek of bat droppings in the ceiling seeped down through the stagnant air.

On bare feet Reed ghosted from the bedroom along the passage and into the living-room. The fireplace was dead now but the air near it was a pool of warmth. The cracks in the polished parquet made ridges in the soles of his feet.

The drapes allowed no moonlight to enter. The front door gave a very quiet creak but it did not open. It was the kind of creak you hear from a coffin when the earth first begins to grip it. Reed's hand brushed the nail-studded mantelshelf. He seized the six-o-six gun. Then he planed the skin off his left thumb in trying to ram the massive bolt into the breech behind a round. He clamped his tongue between his teeth. He moved towards the front door with the six-o-six held in advance. The coldness of the trigger flowed into his right forefinger.

The front door was a tall pane of glass held in a wooden

frame and screened on the inside by a taut curtain. Hector Reed squatted low and hooked aside the edge of the taut curtain at knee level with his elbow. He peered through the glass and a barking cough of horror escaped him.

Glaring back from the other side of the pane was another eye. In the hard moonlight every zigzag vein stood out as though drawn in ink on rice paper. The eyelids could have been cut from mushrooms. Their edges had a glaucous sheen. Reed clutched the six-o-six so firmly that later his fingers were bruised.

At Reed's barking cough the baboon leaped backwards a couple of feet and then ambled away across the lawn and vanished among the solid shadows of the corkbark trees. It was as big as a gourd of water and just about as dangerous.

After this Reed's circulatory system was too flushed with adrenalin to permit further sleeping. He poked at the fireplace and the black embers gave up some more heat. The green light of his first Jamskoni dawn revealed him crouched, like an aborigine, over the exhausted fire.

Nearby on the hearth was last night's coffee bowl half-filled with coagulated dregs. An untidy scatter of stale olive pips and crushed almond shells recorded the encounter with Kangai. Inside the brandy beaker a gluey insect crawled interminably up the glass sides. It never reached beyond a certain steepness in the glass. But its legs never stopped flailing even when it slipped back into the brandy.

TUESDAY

The sunrise shot opaque beams of yellow light levelly across the land. The yellow light spurted through defiles and mountain passes like beams through cathedral windows. Shadows of volcanic peaks forty miles out on the grazing areas were slapped black on the swollen belly of Ol Skoni mountain. Ol Skoni's belly was veined with trails resilient with green dewy turf. Men were carrying newly-cut poles and withies along those trails for erecting a new hut and women carried haystacks on their heads for the thatching. Their shouts and laughter carried with brittle clarity through the limpid air.

Jamskoni administrative centre was concealed by lumpy mists which rolled around the crater of the dead volcano. Two watery headlights peered upward through the fumes. An automobile horn cut across the sunrise. And the satanic Ostrich rose like a meteor from the concealed depths at the wheel of his glittering chariot.

"I say, old bean," grinned the Ostrich after tearing a circular swathe in the lawns with a flourishing sideslip. "There's an elephant in the market."

"I see," said Hector Reed.

The morning air was raising goose pimples across his chilled flesh. The Ostrich handed him a scribbled note from the District Commissioner which said: "Bad habits. Better shoot it." and the goose pimples subsided. His hair prickled across his scalp with terror.

The Ostrich turned off the engine of his automobile and listened to a distant crackling sound which came from the misty floor of the crater. Despite the early hour he was wearing a lounge suit complete with waistcoat and felt hat. Reed still wore nothing at all. The Ostrich grinned.

"Let me have the six-o-six," he said in his dry grating voice, "and I'll clear up the mess. What?"

"I'll clear up the mess," said Reed in a faint voice. "This note is addressed to me." His face had collapsed a little with strain.

"No offence," said the Ostrich. "I thought perhaps you didn't know that the brain is in a straight line between . . ."

"I've seen it in a movie."

"Well. That's all right then, old chum," said the Ostrich in a shout of laughter. He flicked on the engine of his automobile and descended into misty invisibility.

Hector Reed carefully checked the loading of the six-o-six. He put on a pair of shorts and a pair of boots. He switched on the headlights of his bush vehicle and coasted down through layers of mountain mist to the crater's floor.

The down grade suited the clapped-out bush vehicle. It sped up to the cess barrier with a good deal of accumu-

lated momentum. A tribal policeman came running out from the armoury and removed the barrier in time for Reed to burn up the momentum in skidding across the deserted market and drifting sideways to a random parking space.

When he stepped out of the vehicle the mist-damp sand crunched too loudly underfoot. Through the scraps of mist which resembled frozen flames no movement was discernible in the market except for a tribal policeman galloping from the cess barrier to the armoury. Reed gave the bolt of his six-o-six a slam and the crash took a long time to expire. He stood and looked attentively about him. The snuff sellers' stalls were in a beaten-up condition. No movement. No sound. The distant clang of a rain-bird's call momentarily raised Reed an inch or two from the sand.

The elephant was the same colour as the mist. It was also as quiet as the mist but not as unstable. Under the strengthening sunlight the frozen flames spiralled slowly upwards and the elephant became discernible as a part of the mist that did not swirl. Hector Reed walked forward behind the foresight of his six-o-six and the elephant waved its ears like a couple of blankets.

When the morning sun had drawn the last scraps of mist from the market and the sky was revealed as a metallic blue in promise of a very hot day to come, people came back into the area. They found Reed leaning across the flat nose of his bush vehicle and vomiting. He was slightly deaf from the firing of the six-o-six. He needed a shave.

Hector Reed drove his bush vehicle to the barbed-wire

entanglement known as Her Majesty's cells and borrowed three criminals. He gave them one axe each and drove them through the open market to the brewery.

Behind the brewery was a dead elephant. In a dry furrow near the dead elephant was a light luxury car. And inside the light luxury car, struggling, was the District Commissioner. During the contest with the elephant Reed had not noticed the District Commissioner's presence. Nor did he know how the light luxury car came to get stuck.

"Shift into reverse, sir."

"What's that, eh?"

The people were forming a multitude in the market. The three criminals ascended the dead elephant and chopped in turn at its eye. Their white blouses jerked rhythmically as each axehead was exhumed a split second before its neighbour was buried in the elephant's face.

Distractedly, Hector Reed said to the District Commissioner: "Shift left, click left, then back."

But the District Commissioner shifted right. Over on the elephant the three criminals laughed in a bright falsetto as elephant blood spattered their white blouses. Apparently Reed was under the impression that the commissioner's brain was back to front for he gave him mirror instructions in the hope that he would do the opposite.

"Shift right, click right, then forward," said Reed aloud.

The tangled eyebrows jumped to the top of the forehead and the sag in the tired cheeks became flushed with dilated capillaries.

"Are you raving mad?" inquired the commissioner in a tonal pattern which meant: "Australians are all the flaming same."

The three criminals extracted the topmost tusk and rested momentarily before incising deeply for the other one. Reed got into the light luxury car and slightly displaced the driver. He depressed the accelerator pedal and the engine revved. He worked the clutch pedal and the car jumped backwards out of the dry furrow. Many of the people were bringing kerosene tins into the market.

"You are clever with cars," said the District Commissioner.

"My word, sir," said Reed.

"I'll thank you now to leave my car immediately. And never try to humiliate me in public again."

Hector Reed came out of the car with alacrity. The District Commissioner's eyeballs were suffused like peeled pomegranates.

"Sorry, sir."

"You'll pardon my saying so," howled the commissioner racing the engine of the light luxury car. "But most Australians are show-offs to me."

"You'll pardon me saying so," replied Reed. "But most Australians are unknown to you."

The car jumped away and when the dust settled Hector Reed was inside the brewery.

The brewer was a small lumpy man something like a pickled walnut. The dignity and importance of his calling were implicit in the pomp and intricacy of his gestures. He conversed in the insinuating tones of a man of the world.

Reed thrust some pice at the brewer and the brewer filled a half-calabash with soapy solution from a gleaming yellow gourd. Reed drank the warm soap and survived an abdominal spasm.

"Brewer," he said to the brewer, "an excellent brew."

"Truly," the brewer told him fluttering his hand in an incomprehensible gesture, "it is so."

The brew was warm millet ferment audibly seething in a wooden pan. Not much alcoholic content but plenty of virus. Under the falling axeheads the elephant's face took on a series of expressions too hideous for Reed to contemplate. Perspiration gleamed on the taut skins of the criminals. Reed wiped his own forehead. The brewer smiled.

"Ice is supplied," he said, extending the orange palm of his hand, "to people I like."

"Likeable yourself," Reed told him.

"Gracious stranger."

"Splendid host."

Reed put his only florin into the orange palm and the brewer receded ceremoniously from the foreground.

The criminals now brought both tusks into the brewery and Reed stood them half-calabashes all round during the brewer's absence. The tusks were black with blood and dust. At a pound sterling per pound weight they represented weeks of free brandy on the club fund.

People shored up the elephant's throat like a mine and walked inside to carve. The tongue came out as big as a bullock. The flap of cartilage over the entrance to the windpipe became the door to the pantry.

The brewer reappeared with chipped ice in a clay vase

and the party rattled chipped ice around in many half-calabashes, for in that market a florin went a long way.

Some men over by the elephant cut diagonals with their knives across the tops of kerosene tins. The top of each kerosene tin thus became four triangles with a common apex. The four triangles were now bent half inward so that each kerosene tin acquired something of the design of a murderous lobster-pot. You could easily drive your head into the tin. But against the four points of the triangles you could not easily wrench it out.

The men put elephant meat into each of the lobster-pot kerosene tins. They put the tins along the dry furrow, for the hyenas.

"Your good fortune," bubbled one of the criminals just before he took another gulp of the seething brew.

"And yours," said Reed.

Each time the brew was drained from the chipped ice in the half-calabashes the brewer replenished it. The half-calabashes became warm shallow bays where the tide ebbed and flooded until the rocks were finally eroded.

"Why you prison?" asked Reed with his shaky grasp of the vernacular.

The vernacular that gushed forth in response was exorbitant. From the way they pointed at the brew and then at the blood flecks on their blouses it was evident that drunken brawling was the cause of their predicament.

The brewery had no walls but in the splash of shadow under grass thatching the party was all but invisible. As the sun rose higher the rocks in the calabashes eroded more quickly and the power of the elephant was distilled into stench.

The sun was drying the world up. At equatorial noon in that shanty market in the deep dust crater of the dead volcano heat ripples eddied and flickered like disembodied souls in a tribal dance. Immersed in the pool of heat was a tribal policeman. Upon the cess barrier that guarded the market he painted bright Arabic characters which the sun quietly cracked and peeled after him. The characters said: "Anyone abroad at night will be shot."

It was the period when gangsterism covered the Jamskoni mountains and tribal policemen protected citizens by shooting them.

Under crackling iron roofs on the club veranda administrative officers sat and decayed painlessly in wickerwork chairs.

The skull of the elephant became partially revealed through the emaciated face as the carving knives of the citizens sculpted steadily. From the labyrinthine interstices of the skull the hiding place of the brain was revealed. The forehead was revealed as mere hollow bone.

After Hector Reed had driven the three criminals back to Her Majesty's cells he poured boiling water down the barrel of the six-o-six and pulled it through dry. The District Commissioner rumpled his tangled eyebrows into a fresh frown as Reed came into his office. He did not look up from the fresh maul marks on his grey cardboard files.

"I must thank you", said the District Commissioner, "for stopping that elephant."

"Thank you, sir."

The commissioner took a look at the wall map and gave a cough. "I have a man", he said to Reed, "I want you to meet."

"Fine, sir," said Reed eagerly.

"He is disguised as a gangster. You will find him on the Jamskoni mountains."

"Impossible."

"You might get a decoration."

"Make it brandy."

The District Commissioner coughed at the thin red roadline on his wall map. He ran his sunburnt finger along that roadline from where it started in Jamskoni administrative centre.

"Half a case," he said. "We shall charge the club fund. Jolly good luck."

"Cheers," said Reed.

The thin red roadline twisted out into gangster territory high on to the Jamskoni mountains. The District Commissioner seized a map pin and drove it into the twisting red savagely as though skewering the entrails of a gangster.

"There", he told Reed, "you will find your man."

"Quite," gulped Reed.

"Signal me what he tells you."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll remove your pin if you get back."

He extended his arm and Reed handed him a specimen of his dysentery on his moist palm.

"Shall I take the armoured car, sir?"

"Certainly not. It breaks down every few miles."

Hector Reed drove his clapped-out bush vehicle out into gangster territory high up on the Jamskoni mountains and he found his man speared to a bend of the lava-red road. The man told him nothing.

Reed stopped the vehicle and stared. The heart in his chest beat slowly but with painful force and the pulse running through his eyes made the scene vibrate rhythmically. The cooling engine gave a sharp crack and Reed bumped his head on the canopy frame. He got out and knelt by the recumbent man.

As though testing the valve of a leaky tyre Reed dipped a finger under his own tongue and stretched a film of saliva across the nostrils of the pseudo-gangster but no bubble formed. Then he managed to wedge a shoulder under him. The man had no life but he leaned on Reed heavily. Reed stacked the corpse under the tattered canopy.

In the heightened atmosphere the bush vehicle was gasping for oxygen. While backing up to turn about Reed stalled on the edge of the mountainside. Then the starter failed, so he looked under the bonnet and as usual found nothing but chaos. In the clips under the dash where a starting-handle should be there was only a six-o-six.

By radio Reed signalled the District Commissioner and the District Commissioner told him it was jolly bad luck.

On the edge of the mountainside Reed jacked up one back wheel and spun it hard, using a round spanner for a handle. While the wheel revolved he sprang into the vehicle, switched on ignition, shifted into top gear, and let in the clutch. The engine started. Reed left it ticking over in neutral and recovered the jack. He gave himself a thin-lipped smile as he got back into the vehicle. Then while his gaze raked the surrounding terrain he shifted into four-wheel reverse by mistake and let in the clutch.

The vehicle leapt backwards off the road and down the

mountainside. Horrified, Reed watched habit in his toe momentarily depressing the accelerator. The vehicle swerved in reverse. Slid sideways. Twitched and stopped. In the sudden silence and flurry of dust a solitary animal started up and pounded away heavily. Elephant? No. Rhino? No. Only Reed's own overloaded heart.

Soaked in sump oil, his shorts clung to him like newly-cut gazelle skins. He tore off his shirt and dabbed at broken flesh and abrasions. He lay below the vehicle in an oily bog. One boot was missing. His nose was split.

Overhead a door waved down from horizontal hinges. Reed switched off the ignition by reaching up through the steering wheel. His passenger did not complain but he gestured in a provocative manner.

The four wheels of the bush vehicle still touched ground and the vehicle clung, side on, to the mountain slope. The wheels were half buried in a soft patch of spongy black cotton-soil. It was suction more than gravity that prevented the vehicle from rolling.

Because the cotton-soil was soft and hot Reed could use his hands like shovels. He dug a long deep groove for the uppermost wheels so the vehicle could be driven out almost vertically. The shovelling smudged his limbs as black as cooking pots and sweating added polish. After a while Reed faded a little and reclined on the roadway.

Under unfiltered sunlight Reed's skin crust of sweat, sump oil, blood and black cotton-soil set like tar and shrank so that the pain of having every hair plucked woke him. Fear drove him back to shovelling and by late afternoon he had the bush vehicle back on the thin red roadway with the engine revving.

On the return journey downhill the vehicle acquired speed. Reed crouched over the steering wheel to give himself maximum breadth of vision and he drifted around mountainous bends with a style that had gained something from the Ostrich. The crimson ball of sun moved down to the western horizon. As the day cooled animals began to graze on the upland turf and several times Reed swerved to avoid giraffes and elands. Where the roadway swung through one last curve before levelling on to the flats Reed drove at speed into an encounter.

The division between mountain country and dust plain was as clear cut as the division between land and sea. To one side was the steep green turf scattered with poko grass and gladioli of the mountain. The other side had the thorn trees and melon vines of the desert. And arranged along the division in ambush formation were six or eight ugly black men.

The black men had no weapons displayed but the angular shapes of their oilskins and scrappy uniforms showed where Patchett guns were concealed. Two of them knelt along the erosion channel beside the road but the remainder clustered, actually on the roadway, where Reed's vehicle would need to pass.

For the jump of a second the bush vehicle hesitated as Reed trod on the brakes and then desisted. Then the speed continued. A couple of potholes threw all four wheels off the roadway. Clutching fingers on the steering wheel adjusted the trajectory and Reed crouched lower so that only his eyes remained above the lower edge of the windscreen.

One of the black men stood waving until the last mo-

ment before springing aside. As he sprang his voice fluttered into the vehicle's windstream.

"I say, you know. . . ."

It was not the voice so much as the suffused eyeballs like peeled pomegranates. The bush vehicle rumbled on another hundred yards with tightening brake shoes then it noisily shuffled a few disorganized gears and came back in reverse. Hector Reed was soon surrounded by the bunch of dyspeptic administrative officers from the club veranda. Their skins were blackened. They were disguised as gangsters.

"My word," said Reed.

"Hope you don't mind, eh?" said the District Commissioner. "I thought you were a gangster."

With his oil-smeared face and filthy ripped shorts Reed was as disguised as the other administrative officers. The horizon was eating into the sun now and the elastic shadow of Ol Skoni mountain stretched swiftly out across mountainside and plain.

"Shall I drive you home, sir?" asked Reed.

"Not really. We plan to stay out two or three days. But don't worry. We'll take you next time, you know."

The sun was below the lip of the horizon now and its tangent rays formed orange fires on clouds away to the east. The fires moved perceptibly to converge on the west as the shoulder of the earth deflected the sun's rays.

"Mm," said Reed. He fingered the split stump of his nose and wriggled the toes of his bootless foot.

"Get that nose doctored," said the District Commissioner. "And clean up a bit. You look like a half-caste chimney sweep."

"Yes, sir."

With a front wheel wobbling from the fall on the mountainside Hector Reed drove across the floor of the volcanic crater under the chocolate-box sunset. On the far side of the cess barrier people were lighting kerosene lamps and working on the dead elephant. The snuff sellers were pounding tobacco leaf into black powder. The brewer was pouring beer through a wickerwork strainer. The sandal maker was cutting a two-inch sole from the hide of a tractor tyre. The Ostrich was taking advantage of the District Commissioner's absence to have a political meeting. And the tribal policeman was gesturing at the bush vehicle with his regimental shotgun.

"Have you a curfew pass?" asked the tribal policeman sharply in vernacular.

It looked as though Reed was going to shout with impatience but the tribal policeman snicked back the hammer of his shotgun and Reed did not utter. Every woman in the market giggled.

Shakily Hector Reed climbed down from the bush vehicle and the policeman stared hard at his split nose and blackened complexion, then he grinned a little as he stepped back and saluted. He opened the cess barrier without further comment.

Now with a booted foot for the clutch and a bare foot for the accelerator Reed coaxed the limping bush vehicle through the darkening market. He turned at the brewery to follow the street which led round behind the hospital. In the honey-yellow light from the kerosene lamps the jumble of the brewer's polished gourds offered high-

lighted reflections like a burnished bunch of giant grapes.

Behind the hospital was the hospital morgue. To extract his passenger from the bush vehicle Reed had to unlace some of the tattered canopy. Wild driving and stiffening tissues had frozen this passenger halfway through an exaggerated gesture so that now he claimed more space than was really necessary.

From the dying warmth of the sunset hour Reed carried him into the preserving chill of the hospital morgue. Upon entering the clinical coldness of the morgue Reed's nose ached heavily. Exhaustion half crippled him. And something of the passenger's stiffness seeped into his spinal column. Unexpectedly stunned by temperature drop he shuddered and peered around drawn-faced; his passenger seemed to have ample company.

Fitting the dead man into cold storage was like jamming a frozen shark into an ice chest. Reed manipulated the stiffened limbs. And as he struggled he was accosted by the pompous and important brewer who came boldly into the morgue. Strictly speaking the brewer was not allowed in there.

"Hey, you there, gut collector," said the brewer roughly in vernacular. "Fix this vase for me quickly. I have important guests waiting."

The only covering for Reed's filthy skin was shredded shorts. Perhaps his personality was too crushed to offer resistance. Or he wished to avoid weary explanation. In any case he played the role he was arrayed for. He mimicked the servility of a lowly hospital dresser.

"Greetings, great brewer," said Reed. "What is your will?"

The brewer shook his clay vase at him and Reed filled it with chipped ice from the nearest corpse.

Later the stricken bush vehicle wandered up the steep track to the dwelling on the lip of the volcanic crater. Hector Reed crawled into a deep hot bath and lay there motionless while fatigue and filth dissolved. Kangai was wearing a fresh saree. She was talking a good deal about the Ostrich but Reed was not listening. After a lot of soaping and sluicing Reed came out of the bath. The big towel smelled of sunshine and mountain air. Kangai handed Reed a fresh pair of thick white ankle socks. They tingled pleasantly when Reed put them on. His soft tan walking-shoes were buffed to a dull smoothness. The crisp khaki shorts crackled with starch and the hand-woven safari-shirt hugged Reed's shoulders with the right amount of warmth.

"You very pretty girl," he said to Kangai and her slant eyelids almost closed as she tilted her head slightly back so that the subdued wet-red of her painted lips marked the most forward promontory of her placid profile. She lifted a polished wooden platter from the table and held it in the tea-coloured curve of her arm where its underside picked up writhing reflections of flames in the kindling fire. On the platter was a tall amber beaker. Gin, angostura, ice and water in a slender little calabash. Reed fixed an oily pink gin. Kangai's proximity was a faint aroma of crushed tamarisk. Softly she placed the platter back on the table and her awakening breasts jostled drowsily in the nest of transparent gauze. Reed drank the gin. As he placed the beaker on the platter he ran his forearm lightly across the nest of gauze. Slowly, almost painfully,

Kangai turned. Pink nipples had pushed outwards against the gauze and a pink tongue-tip trembled between the dark-red lips.

In the remote distance a needle-thin scream sounded like a 'cello arpeggio in an amplifying system. The noise was hideous enough for gangster torture, but it was only a hyena with its head in a kerosene tin. The beams from powerful headlights played across the louvred window of the living-room and the Ostrich's automobile ploughed another crescent furrow in the clipped lawns. Before the Ostrich could stride skinny-legged in through the doorway Reed had leaned forward and tasted the warm wet flutter of the pink tongue-tip.

"Tonight's the night, you two," shouted the Ostrich in his dry croak as he strode into the living-room. He was wearing cream slacks, a loose loafer's jacket and a handkerchief for a necktie.

"I am not sure what you mean."

"I mean, old bean," said the Ostrich, "no matter what a woman does someone is going to call her a dirty word."

"Oh! Is that a fact?"

"You know that as well as I do."

"All right."

Without being asked Kangai produced a glass of beer for the Ostrich.

"I do not wish to break up anything between you and your girl friend but——"

"She is not my girl friend," said Reed.

"But what about helping me tonight?"

"All right."

While they ate dinner they talked.

"To win the democratic elections I have to stay alive," said the Ostrich.

"No one will vote for you if you become dead," added Reed.

"This I fully believe," grinned the Ostrich.

Later, when they got into the automobile, Reed noticed that Kangai came too. The Ostrich drove down to the floor of the crater across the market and into the labyrinth of streets and alleys. He parked in the shadowy groove of a street not far from his drycleaning shop. Without speaking, Kangai left the automobile and entered the Premji Drycleanery. Soon a yellow light came out through the entrance and her shadow flitted across the light as she fulfilled habitual chores.

"But alive or dead," the Ostrich told Reed, "I get very few votes in this street."

Reed said nothing. He kicked aside the debris left by flying masonry and seized a police-department tear-gas container which had been damaged by grenades. He held it on the edge of the pavement while the Ostrich got his skinny legs upright on top of it. Several citizens gathered around the Ostrich like forest dogs around a half-dead carcase. Some of them gave excited little yelps.

"Excellent tidings, citizens," cried the Ostrich in his dry skinny voice. "The democratic elections mean you vote for your own leaders."

"Try to make them laugh," murmured Reed grimly as more citizens came out from the shadows and pressed in tightly.

"I call myself the Ostrich," cried the Ostrich, "because citizens do not eat ostriches."

The pressing forest dogs yelped hungrily while Reed groaned.

The Ostrich had plenty of determination but he lacked the magic touch. His jaws flapped with clockwork regularity. His loafer's jacket swung like a pendulum from his bony shoulders. And his voice came out like mechanical chimes. The damaged tear-gas container rocked unsteadily on the edge of the pavement and the citizens yelped in derisive chorus as they pressed in more tightly.

"On your voting papers there are no words," cried the Ostrich, "only pictures. So put your cross on the ostrich picture."

Soon citizens' hands were moving over Reed's body with the delicacy of horned claws. He wriggled away through the tightly-pressed crowd. Perhaps he tried to wriggle in an inoffensive manner but they pressed too tightly. When he saw that one citizen was trying to lever the metal nose off the parked automobile with a *sime* slashing knife Reed stopped trying to be inoffensive.

He dislodged a few citizens somewhat abruptly as he jumped out of the political meeting, and immediately a rattle of handclaps began to punctuate the Ostrich's voice. The citizen with the slashing knife quickly took Reed's place in the political meeting and became indistinguishable from his companions. Reed peered intently at the parked automobile to ascertain that the battery had not been stolen.

Behind, in the political meeting, the handclaps decreased in frequency and increased in loudness until they sounded like single shots on a rifle range. Reed got into the parked automobile and snapped on the headlamps so

that the meeting was immersed in floodlights. He trampled on a pedal or two and the automobile surged forward so that floodlights became spotlights and some citizens raised their hands to their eyes. The Ostrich had been clapped down from the tear-gas container and as he stood grinning on the pavement citizens aimed handclaps at his face. Reed raised the beams on the headlamps and honked the horn, but it was like shooing flies off a tub of molasses.

"Good citizens," the Ostrich's bruised face crumpled into an idiot smile, "you come from one clan and I from another."

Blood soaked out of his contused face so that each handclap was printed in gaudy ink. Surrounded by tightly-pressed citizens the Ostrich had no way of escape. He made no gesture of defence. The crowd was like a pack of forest dogs. They snarled and crouched ready to spring. They nipped and yelped. But they needed an invitation before tearing their quarry to shreds. The invitation had to be a gesture of panic. A flicker of fear.

No doubt the Ostrich's position was hopeless. In the ancient tribal circles this handclap business used to go on until the victim died or until the tribesmen got bored from lack of response. The main charm of the business was that it took a long time.

"But do not think that democratic elections are a form of clan warfare."

A citizen with golliwog hair and earlobes down to his elbows stepped into the blinding spotlights and gave the Ostrich a clap on the face which made the next few words unintelligible. Then the words went on.

". . . forget ancient differences . . . work together. . . ."

The dry skinny voice contained as much panic as the vibrant tick-tock of a rusty clock. The smile became more crumpled but no less secure. Reed braked the surging automobile barely short of sweeping the political meeting off the pavement and into the Premji Drycleanery. He wound the side window down an inch. He shouted: "Jump in, Ostrich."

The Ostrich did not budge. The yelping avalanche did not pounce. After a while the Ostrich took half a step towards the automobile but almost imperceptibly.

As soon as the automobile stopped the citizens had scratched at it with their pointed nails. Fingernails grated over its metal skin and fingertips came in through the open inch of the side window. Keeping his hands displayed on the steering wheel Reed lifted his knee under the winding-handle and the window bit savagely at the intruding fingers. So tenacious was the side window that the fingertips remained fixed even though the citizen behind them leaned back powerfully.

"Let us relax our tensions and straighten out our differences. Then the standard of living will rise. . . ."

Reed relaxed his knee and the citizen straightened out his legs. Then he rose a little from the pavement. The sudden release of his fingertips caused him to carom against the heads of those behind him. He shot backwards in through the doorway of the Premji Drycleanery just as if he had been flicked like a springy cane. He lay back horizontal on the cement floor of the Premji Drycleanery and sizzled audibly against the side of a hand-beaten bowl which contained red-hot charcoal. His black pupils

seemed to grow smaller because his eyeballs extruded. He bounced slackly once or twice then lay still on his back.

"No place to sleep," said Reed loudly and a shout of laughter from the tightly-pressed citizens marked up a bull's-eye on the political meeting. The handclaps stopped cracking like rifle shots and citizens explained to each other what Reed had said. Reed got out of the automobile.

The citizen on the cement floor rubbed temperamentally at his scorched neck and sucked his lips into his mouth. He came back into the political meeting but he did not shout with laughter even when the others told him what had happened. Not that all the others were laughing. Many were merely twittering like cuckoo rainbirds and a few standing around the golliwog with the elbow-length ear lobes were pulling their foreheads down over their eyes and muttering.

Reed set up the container again on the edge of the pavement. The Ostrich continued to grin idiotically as he rocked into his dreary address. He caught Reed's eye and winked confidently without missing a dreary word, but he dripped blood on to Reed's hand-woven safarishirt.

Gradually the citizens stopped twittering like cuckoo rainbirds and started yelping again like hungry forest dogs. Reed stripped off his drip-spotted safarishirt and carried it out of the political meeting into the Premji Drycleanery. Inside, the sounds from the pavement lost their clarity so that the Ostrich's voice became a squawk and the yelps from the citizens a gurgle of squeaks. Reed gave his shirt to Kangai and she dipped a sponge into a shallow calabash of ocean-blue cleaning fluid.

On the cement floor of the Premji Drycleanery was a hand-beaten bowl as big as a bath and full of charcoal. Where yellow light from the kerosene lamp fell on it the charcoal was grey, lifeless dust, but where thick shadows from the unlit corner fell on it, it rippled with reddish transparent heat.

Because Reed and Kangai had only the scraps of a common language they did not say much. She worked sadly in the light of the lamp and he loafed nervously in the shadows of the unlit corner. She rubbed ocean-blue trilene into the bloodstains on his safarishirt, while he fiddled with the Ostrich's hubblebubble pipe. Now and then she wailed a verse or two of an Asian hymn, which sounded like an amplified mosquito, and Reed took a pull or two at the hubblebubble, which tasted like insecticide. But despite the hymn and the hubblebubble Reed had to admit that her structural bonework moved as flexibly as young bamboo under the tea-coloured flesh and that the tea-coloured flesh billowed and folded like kapok bolls under the gauze saree.

"Would you mind not singing?" he asked in English and his voice vibrated with feeling. Her eyes blinked open with piercing highlights from the lamp. She thrust those highlights at Reed and he did not look elsewhere. Then purple eyelids with shirred lashes extinguished the highlights and Kangai was a maidservant again with a face like a hidden grudge.

"You sound worse than the Ostrich," Reed explained. She put aside her sponge. She took a long breath, and on her melancholy features a thin smile appeared. She came and knelt beside Reed in the thick shadows while a

breakaway group from the political meeting chattered earnestly in the doorway of the Drycleanery.

Reed twisted his lips bitterly around the mouthpiece of the hubblebubble and draped his fingers artistically along its tubing. In the hubblebubble there was neither a drop of water nor a shred of dagga leaf. But there was plenty of theatre. Kangai smiled a smile like boiled cream on a saucer of tea and huddled softly beside Reed as inconspicuously as a sweet potato in chocolate soil.

Chill draughts moved fitfully through the Premji Drycleanery. Transparent heat rippled through the reddish charcoal. And crimson reflections ran across the enlivened features of Kangai. The earnest chattering of the group in the doorway was orchestrated thunder building to a climax.

Because he sat crosslegged, Reed's overfed belly came out as a complacent bulge below his rib cage and in the crimson glow of the red-hot charcoal the bulge was not unlike an overripe tomato. The citizen with the scorched neck suddenly came away from the group on the doorway and pushed the extreme sharpness of a *sime* slashing knife up against the overripe tomato. His fingertips were discoloured with blood blisters.

With that cold-wire web of sensation across his belly Reed ceased every voluntary motion and even strove to control his trembling. The brevity of his love affair with Kangai appalled him bitterly but the eternity of the present death affair paralysed him completely.

If you were to press an extremely sharp knife up against the skin of an overripe tomato the skin would sink into a groove but the knife would not cut unless slight sideways

friction were applied. The slight friction would cut the skin and once the skin were cut the whole tomato could be sliced with ease. Wholeheartedly now Reed concentrated on avoiding the slightest friction.

A yellow moth pelted out of the parchment lampshade and ricochetted against his unwinking eyeball. It fell into the grey, lifeless dust in the hand-beaten bowl and exploded with a plop of flower-shaped flame. The explosion that finished the moth almost finished Reed. A momentary convulsion shot through him and the slashing knife left a thin-lipped smile where a watch chain ought to be. The smile was a red-hot cobweb. Reed had never suspected the depth of affection he had for his belly, but now the point was brought home to him intimately.

Outside on the pavement the Ostrich's voice squawked on drily. His skinny body swayed under the collisions of waves of pressure which flowed through the political meeting. He remained afloat on his raft of relentless determination. Inside the Drycleanery Reed pulled nervously on the hubblebubble. He drew his overripe tomato back against his backbone while flickers of fear twitched through his carcase. Sensation-starved citizens were now turning, dissatisfied, away from the political meeting and coming to glare ravenously at him.

There was not much chatter, but they all seemed to know what came next. When they laid several hands on Reed and shoved his foot into the hand-beaten bowl, the cuff of his white ankle sock dropped away as ashen dust and the salt in his sweat-soaked leather sole burned with a jade-green flame. The sole curled and cracked into crazywork flakes. The sock frizzled with a smell of

squashed ants, and his bare foot gave out a faint sizzle of steam. For a blink it gave him a sensation of intense cold, as though it were ice. Then the foot jumped out of the bowl and the mouthpiece of the hookah splintered between Reed's teeth. A deep gasp of horror made him pull in a large lungful of air. No one had ever worked harder at a hubblebubble.

Jealous for his share of torment the Ostrich squawked more loudly out on the pavement, but compared with Reed's infernal circus his political meeting had no appeal. Now not a citizen heeded the Ostrich but every one of them heeded Reed with a trustfulness that was akin to worship. The ravenous yelping had faded into silent attentiveness and even the face of the golliwog was unusually calm as though he were contemplating real food again at the end of a pining drought.

From where she huddled in the shadows Kangai poured the ocean-blue fluid from her calabash into the hookah. The ocean-blue was ordinary trichlorethylene, commonly called trilene. It is used by drycleaners to eradicate stains. It is also used by dentists to eradicate pains.

Now as Reed pulled diligently on the mouthpiece the hookah boiled effervescently. Every pull brought bubbles of air rising through the fluid so that the air tasted slightly chemical when it reached his mouth. Repeatedly he pulled the hubblebubbled air deep into his lungs and his bloodstream took the trilene down through his arteries. Cautiously he flexed his coccyx so that the cement floor would not stop the pulse in his plaited legs.

Hector Reed squatted stiff-backed behind his naked

knees. He raised his arms as though he were a heathen priest before a pagan horde. Like a polished urn his sweat-slick chest caught the crimson glow from the red-hot charcoal and threw it back at the golliwog. Reed's fingers and toes were turning to icicles. His time was running out.

The golliwog seized the hand-bellows and sent blasts of chill air into the hand-beaten bowl. The charcoal pulsed like blood. Sparks jumped out and cracked drily in the air.

The tightly-pressed citizens gave a concerted sigh like coastal monsoons whimpering through casuarina trees. From the pavement through the doorway and around the cement floor of the Premji Drycleanery the citizens made a hill of people. Their bowed heads shone with crimson reflections.

The Ostrich suddenly squawked: "That's enough," but Reed persisted with his ceremony. He was slightly tight on terror.

Kicking up a knee he voluntarily put a foot into the charcoal and the crowd sighed as he left it there. Then he put in the other foot. The shoe leather was soon consumed.

Out in the shadowy groove of the street floating dust from the long day's traffic settled now through the stagnant darkness and the life of Jamskoni suffocated steadily under its weight. Nothing moved except a limbless beggar who nudged hopelessly at the tight lid of a garbage bin. The beggar sniffed the air and traversed the street towards the Premji Drycleanery by contracting and expanding like a hairless caterpillar. He was salivating visibly

when he reached the doorway but they would not let him in.

Reed's excitement absorbed what little pain the trilene did not quench. An idiot smile curved on his face and he seemed too sluggish to budge. Then slowly he withdrew his feet to the crosslegged position.

A sob of astonishment broke out simultaneously from each citizen in the hill of people. Then came a high-pitched chord from a hundred throats like a rasping chorus from tenor fiddles.

By now the trilene was carrying icicle numbness throughout Reed's whole circulatory system, and further movement was beyond his capabilities. His eyeballs rolled sufficiently to take in the grin on the Ostrich's demoniacal face and the slender smile on the face of Kangai.

With the hand-bellows again the unrequited golliwog started to send fresh blasts of chill air into the charcoal. But the Ostrich pushed abruptly through the crowd and caught him a clap on the face.

"This is no place for cooking," said the Ostrich loudly.

In the tumultuous shout of laughter the Ostrich lifted Reed bodily and carried him out to the back seat of the automobile. Kangai slipped in beside Reed.

Across the windscreen was a freshly pasted poster which said: VOTE FOR THE LION. The Ostrich tore it off before driving away.

"Mind you, old bean. You were overdoing it a bit," he said as he fitted his long bony frame behind the steering wheel.

As the automobile cruised away along the shadowy

street the trilene in Reed's bloodstream enhanced the analgesia. He did not reply. Kangai held his shoulders as the automobile swayed him, and the noise of the political meeting receded until it was no more than the drunken dream of a somnolent surf on a tropical shore.

The automobile swerved across the deserted market and Reed's head sagged down on to Kangai's abdomen. Then it jerked into the steep climb up the side of the crater and Kangai tucked one knee under her chin so that the spongy terrain about her extruding clitoris was presented as a hot little pillow. Reed was completely insensible now.

At the stone house the Ostrich spoke peremptorily to Kangai and she went away to her quarters behind the red-flowering corkbark trees. The Ostrich performed medication on Reed. He rubbed boracic acid into his feet. He tucked him into bed and sat down beside him.

Reed slept in deathly stillness for the remainder of the night.

Occasionally the Ostrich laid a set of loose finger bones across his forehead. Occasionally he gave a grin which gleamed in the dark bedroom like the luminous malignant fungus which attacks putrefying tree trunks.

WEDNESDAY

Next day the elephant was twenty-four hours dead. Its skeleton showed here and there through its deflated hide as the magnificent musculature became translated into meals. On a colossal scale it resembled a ruined lizard fallen among black ants. Women with kerosene tins of flesh riding on their shaven skulls moved in lines through the market from the elephant's torso. A tribal policeman in a heavy truck was engaged in running over the tins in the furrow that had entrapped hyenas. A spear manufacturer was dipping tempered-steel leaves from the suspension of a derelict motor-car into the elephant's blood to increase their value as spearheads.

Reed concealed himself in his whitewashed work cell but he never got away from the elephant. Holding his nose he was heard to mutter that he could understand why the District Commissioner was so anxious to get out on patrol. In the muggy atmosphere of the imminent rains the elephant's presence became increasingly bothersome.

The Ostrich assured him that tomorrow would be ten

times worse. To judge by the smiles on the well-fed multitude no one else suffered discomfort. Rancid flesh was not merely bearable. It was highly edible.

"I brought you the forms to fill in for the accident you had yesterday," said the Ostrich.

"Fine. Let me have one."

"Not just one. You need fourteen copies."

"All right."

The Ostrich grabbed at the front wheel of the bush vehicle and it almost came off in his hands.

"Will you pay by cheque?" he asked. "Or do you want it deducted from your salary?"

"Just take it to the government workshops," shouted Reed. "This is a government vehicle."

"Government vehicles are never insured. The officer driving is responsible."

Reed was now snarling. "I better talk this over with the District Commissioner. I was on a dangerous mission."

"I would advise you not to mention it," said the Ostrich seriously. "The District Commissioner has a habit of bumping up my own assessments."

"All right. Take it out of salary."

"You can't get away that easily. There are all these forms to fill in."

At last Reed said "There you are" roughly and thrust the sheaf of forms at the Ostrich.

"You will be charged two per cent on the unpaid balance."

There were bars in the window of Hector Reed's work cell. Inside the bars as he swung round the cell he saw a table, a phone, a buffalo-skin drum, a walkie-talkie and a

six-o-six round on the floor where he could trip over it. Beyond the window he could see the cess barrier. Also the tribal policeman, the potter, the snuff seller, the morgue, the brewer, the equator and the dead elephant roughly in that order.

The elephant was nasally reminiscent of a whaling outfit in a good season. The ivory had been translated into reserves of free brandy on the club fund.

"I am afraid, old bean," said the Ostrich. "Wednesday morning usually contains the week's work."

"What is the first task?"

"Cases."

Hector Reed thereupon stood behind the chairless table and dealt with cases. Occasionally he drummed nervously with his knuckles on the buffalo-skin drum to stimulate the thought processes.

"Don't touch the drum too often, old man," the Ostrich warned. "You might call out the fire brigade or give the government clerks a half-holiday."

The first case was a tax collector who had inveigled illiterate tax payers into paying double for single receipts. Reed spent two hours delving into relevant detail. When he found that the next nine cases were of identical pattern he stopped delving so deeply. He ordered salary deductions with two per cent on the unpaid balance and holidays in the compounds of Her Majesty's cells.

Most of the cases were oathers. Men who had solemnly declared their support for the gangsters' campaign of massacre and torture. Also there were three cattle thieves from a distant nomadic tribe and a few lady circumcisers.

The three cattle thieves were tall red men who spent

the time in looking disdainful. Their leader expressed disappointment at the mildness of the sentence.

"If you catch us you should kill us," he said, shaking his grey head. "But let us not renounce the noble sport of cattle stealing."

Towards noon the multitude in the market set up a massed shout. Reed trotted out of his work cell to investigate the disturbance. At the nucleus of the disturbance lay the dead elephant. Fresh bright blood was flowing from its stale grey flesh.

"That's arterial blood," said Reed. "You can tell by the colour."

"Right you are," said the Ostrich. "But not the elephant's."

While wriggling through the extravagant convolutions of the gigantic viscera, one of the internal butchers had been pierced by the knife of a colleague who was making an abdominal incision from the outside. That the piercing was not yet fatal was evident from the manner in which the elephant's appendix heaved and throbbed.

Because, in that tangle of crimson tripe, elephant and man were indistinguishable, no one was permitted to slice an emergency exit in the elephant's side. In defiance of regard for his crisply-tailored clothing the Ostrich plunged into the elephant's windpipe and with a good deal of hesitation Reed took a divergent header down the gullet. He was in time to help the Ostrich drag the bleeding butcher out past the epiglottis and into the hospital. Because of the Ostrich's alacrity the butcher was not promoted to the morgue.

"This elephant is getting in my hair," confessed Hector

Reed to the Ostrich, as they both cleaned up. "I feel I ought to get away for a holiday."

"If you want a jolly good loaf," said the Ostrich. "You could go and visit one of the coffee estates."

For the midday meal Kangai served sippets and soup. Trout freshly poached from the mountain streams. Stuffed paprika and baked elephant shreds.

"I don't want a good loaf," cried Reed, covering the elephant shreds with his napkin. "I want fresh air."

The jellied fruit with chopped nuts was palatable and then came local coffee in thick glazed bowls.

"Coffee is the backbone of Jamskoni," said the Ostrich. "Coffee is never a loaf."

"I heartily agree."

"You are expected to check the account books at the coffee estates. The idea, old chum, is to ensure that the taxation returns are straight."

"Is that a fact? My word." Reed frowned at Kangai in an attempt to frighten her back to the kitchen. "Tell me a nice estate to visit."

"The van Stopeles' estate is farthest from the elephant," said the Ostrich.

"Then it is the van Stopeles' estate for me," said Reed. "What you want?" he suddenly said in angry vernacular to Kangai.

Without replying, Kangai went back to the kitchen. She came out again and stood on the lawn when the two men drove off. Reed did not look back. Her gauze saree drooped a little under the zenith sun. Her hand was raised as though she had forgotten it.

At the District Commissioner's office they borrowed a

fountain pen and an adding machine. At Jamskoni airstrip they borrowed a 1926 de Havilland Leopard-Moth. The Ostrich grinned so hard that the thin mask of flesh on his bony face creased into a devil's mask. He strapped on a flying-helmet.

'It is a little risky, you know," he grinned. "The van Stopeles live a long way up the mountain."

"Oh," said Reed. "You mean gangster country."

"Well. Yes and no."

The Ostrich was jerking experimentally at the wire struts and the wings were flapping slackly. The Leopard-Moth was painted in blaring zebra stripes apparently for camouflage purposes.

"Before we leave the airstrip we are already five thousand feet above sea-level. In some conditions that is our ceiling."

"Ah," said Hector Reed. "Let us not bother."

"However in the afternoon air we get an extra lift."

The Ostrich opened the hatch of the little cabin and a smell came out as of an age gone by. The plush on the theatre-type seats was worn but the workmanship was undeniable. The rear seat creaked as Reed climbed into it and the aeroplane shrugged slightly. The Ostrich fiddled with the tiny dashboard and then stepped out front and swung the propellor. The resultant run of synchronized explosions was deafening but not loud enough to be reassuring. The Ostrich laughed vacantly and folded his bony frame into the front seat.

"What's the joke?" shouted Reed against the roar of the engine but the Ostrich did not reply immediately. The grin stuck grimly to his vulture face while his hands and

feet performed mystical ceremony. The Leopard-Moth ran the whole length of the airstrip and then over a good deal of the grazing area before the wings took the weight. A couple of gaunt francolin ran in circles until the plane was past.

"I see nothing to grin about," repeated Reed and the Ostrich recklessly turned his chin over his shoulder to answer.

"In Jamskoni", he explained, "we have an ancient proverb: Only a fool laughs at the spear."

"I know who'll laugh if you spear that buffalo up front."

The Ostrich returned his attention to the controls and the blue-black buffalo drifted past like a battleship on the starboard wing. It was close enough to see the verdigris vegetation cluttering the folds of skin and the colonies of ticks around the fire-filled eyes. The hooves left marks like dinner plates. The tail flicked like a stockwhip.

"It thinks we are a hawk," said the Ostrich.

"Being unable to understand your mind," said Reed, "I have a lot of respect for you; you who can understand a buffalo's."

"My mind is simple. Old chum. I'm on the side of the fool. What the hell's the point of living if you can't laugh at the spear?"

"Laugh if you like, but don't drag me into it."

The Leopard-Moth never got very far above the ground. As the afternoon wore on the Ostrich floated higher up the mountainside by riding the runnels of warm air that flowed up the re-entrants from the hot plains.

"You are the same way," said the Ostrich. "You could be back selling television sets."

"I swore I'd never look at another sales docket," admitted Reed. "That is not the same thing."

"Yes it is, old bean. Exactly the same thing. A romantic refugee from suburbia."

"I have never felt less like laughing," said Reed.

"It's not a laughing matter. That's just the point."

Finally they landed on a jeep track and drove along it until they came to the van Stopeles' private airstrip. The Leopard-Moth shuddered across the ripples of the private airstrip and stopped before the expanded-metal gates of a three-sided barn. The barn was on the edge of a coffee estate whose plantation lanes, lined with silky-oaks, were too narrow to take the plane's wings.

Hector Reed and the Ostrich climbed out. The airstrip was springy with kikuyu grass. Far below them on the grazing areas the land was acquiring the powdery blueness of approaching sundown. As a contrast to the cinema atmosphere of the little cabin the air here was fresh enough to nip your nose. Under the oaks some men were burning a heap of leaves and the aroma vividly laced the air. The distant sound of an American jeep seemed to emphasize the tranquillity.

The Ostrich spread a canvas holdall of tools on the green turf and opened the aeroplane's engine. He was dickering with the engine when a jeep came down a lane and wheeled towards the barn.

"That is Mr. van Stopele," said the Ostrich. "I'll see you later."

Then the man-who-laughed-at-spears put his helmeted head in with the plane engine and tapped at metal with metal. The jeep jerked to a stop an inch or two short of

crushing matchwood out of the Leopard-Moth and the driver sprang out. The Ostrich was tracing the petrol feed earnestly.

Mr. van Stopele was big and heavy. Bursting from the overalls he wore. His red beefy face had a three-day growth and an Afrikaner moustache. He had a holstered revolver strapped to his muscular paunch. The sun was not down and he stank of whisky.

"How do you do, sir?" inquired Reed. "I've come for the regular taxation check."

Mr. van Stopele growled something in reply which got too mixed up with a bilious cough to be articulate. He got back in the jeep and roared up the engine.

"You've got room for two?" asked Reed.

"Not on your life," shouted Mr. van Stopele.

The Ostrich did not look up from his petrol feed. "It's all right," he called. "I got to fix this leak."

Mr. van Stopele spat on the ground. He backed the jeep in a nimble curve which placed it where Reed could climb in easily. As he and Reed roared away from the Leopard-Moth and into a silky-oak lane he shouted in Reed's ear: "Only whites in my jeep." Reed looked back.

The Ostrich's face was puckered up like green leather treated with astringent. But he was not grinning.

The jeep hurtled along between rows of dark-green coffee trees. Soon it came to a luxurious oasis. A long low house painted white, with eaves and roof beams painted black. Two acres of show-standard horticulture display. And among the flowers and shrubs, expensive sedan cars, a badminton court, an exotic rockery, a swimpool, and a small army of servants. Surrounding the oasis was a

four-hundred-acre coffee estate and beyond the coffee trees was untouched rain forest populated with angry animals.

Like her husband, Mrs. van Stopele was heavily built, but no one could call her fat. She appeared now in matador pants and black suntop with an oil-painting brush in one hand and an empty wine glass in the other. As she came across the lawn between the flower-beds a tall servant overtook her.

The tall servant was of *café-au-lait* colour and dressed in a gleaming white smock. His eyes were slantish but his jaw was as square as a Norseman's. He took the wine glass from Mrs. van Stopele so that she could shake hands with Reed.

"How delightful to meet you. Is yours a martini?" said Mrs. van Stopele.

"Delighted."

The tall servant hurried into the house so that when they entered martinis were served on the threshold. Reed had no luggage but it did not seem to matter.

As far as he could recall there was no dinner served that evening. Just a succession of drink accompanied by buffet scraps. A succession of love songs in French came from the stereo hi-fi and occasionally he found himself dancing on buffed concrete with Mrs. van Stopele.

There was a big log fire flickering in a wide recess at one end of the room and arranged about the low walls was the usual assortment of morbid bric-à-brac. Buffalo-horns, rhino-horns, guns, skins, spears.

Hector Reed made several attempts to explain why he wished to look at the account books but he could make no headway against Mr. van Stopele's story about what he

once did to a charging rhino with an anti-tank rifle. Excited by his own story, Mr. van Stopele raised his voice:

". . . and I knew I could not afford to miss."

"Don't you adore this piece?" asked Mrs. van Stopele. "It is my favourite number."

"That is very understandable," said Reed to both of them.

"You probably don't know it . . ." added Mr. van Stopele.

"I suppose you understand the words," added Mrs. van Stopele. "It is about . . ."

". . . but a rhino is short-sighted."

"It certainly is," said Reed.

". . . and the man never came back. Do you think we could dance it?"

"Mildred," shouted Mr. van Stopele. "I am talking to the guest."

Again and again the stereo hi-fi whined in French for the man who never came back. Again and again Reed wound his rubbery legs into the rhythmical inflections of the whine. During each dance Mrs. van Stopele pressed her body tightly against Reed's. Her matador pants often encompassed his entirely. Her forehead pushed in underneath his ear and when a wisp of tinted female hair got in the way, it ground like abrasive paper. After a while the pretext of following dance steps was forgotten.

"We must be careful," Mrs. van Stopele spoke into the collar of Reed's shirt. "He can be terribly jealous."

"I say," said Reed. "Do you think we ought to sit down?"

"I'll say. Let's."

Mrs. van Stopele took Reed's fingertips in her hand and led him out through the wide glass doors. For an instant or two the firelight flickered across his face then he was in the stark world of solid-black shadows from the silky-oaks. And paper-white illuminations from the almost-full moon. Between the rows of coffee trees the soil sank elastically underfoot. The scent of white coffee blossom added verve to the mountain night. Mrs. van Stopele drew Hector Reed's fingertips into the twin system of muscles at the base of her spine so that as she walked her buttocks nudged him alternately. The distant rumble of Mr. van Stopele's monologue became fainter. He was either continuing the rhino narrative or cursing the situation.

"You mustn't take too much notice of Jan, he is slightly round the twist."

"Oh!"

Reed collided clumsily when she stopped and turned. His free hand was led across the mountain pass of her heavy waist to flow beneath the sweat band of the matador pants and join his imprisoned hand on the extreme peninsular of her spinal sacrum. Her buttocks gave a twitch or two in a way which a novice might mistake for orgasms. The black suntop had somehow slipped away and Mrs. van Stopele's enormous breasts were revealed as twin yellow moons each bearing a crinkled red circle shaped like a mouth in utter distaste.

"Every white man in Jamskoni has tried to make love to me," said Mrs. van Stopele.

"You are very attractive," said Hector Reed.

Mrs. van Stopele laughed silently and her bulbous breastwork joggled complacently. Her painted lips quivered with laughter over her strong teeth. She turned her face up under Reed's ear. She drove her teeth into his earlobe and his whole frame jerked. He leaped away. Mrs. van Stopele took a pace towards him and he raised his arms protectively.

Mrs. van Stopele's face seemed to lose its oily fluidity and set like lard. She stepped back a little among the coffee trees and caught Reed a heavy jolt on the side of his cheek with the back of her assortment of finger rings.

"What do you think I am?" she shrieked. "A cheap tart."

Defensively Reed grasped her hands and she yelled for her husband. Reed broke away and moved back along the row of coffee trees. He crouched slightly and spread his fingers in an attitude of alertness like a basketball player. He looked from Mrs. van Stopele towards the house and back again. A dangling skeletal black hand fell across his shoulder. He released an explosive shout.

"Enjoying yourself, old bean?" said the Ostrich.

He still wore the flying-helmet. In the deep shadows his bloodshot eyes picked up the hard moonlight and glowed. His spiky teeth flashed in a ferocious smile. Mrs. van Stopele came past in a bustle of joggling members. Sharply-stencilled patches of moonlight undulated dramatically across her moon-yellow contours. She went into the house.

"Well. I suppose that is the end of me," sighed Hector Reed.

"Don't be too disconsolate. It happens to everyone."

"But did you see what she did?"

"Stop bragging."

From the house came the thin treble of the stereo hi-fi again in a French melody.

"All right," said Reed. "Let's get out to the airstrip."

"On the contrary, old boy. You get right back in that house. No point in magnifying your importance."

"I suppose you are right. How are you fixed for sleeping quarters?"

"I have a stretcher in Hando's room."

Reed stepped back into the trembling firelight of the living-room and even had another dance or two with Mrs. van Stopele. Mr. van Stopele seemed completely absorbed in cleaning the moving mechanisms of various weapons. In the liquor-dimmed haze of mumbled conversations time floated past in a blur of indistinct memories.

All through the tepid turmoil the tall *café-au-lait* servant delivered drinks unflaggingly and next morning, when Reed awoke in one of the guest rooms, was the only fresh personality in the household. His name was Hando. He was a hybrid. Half-Arab and half-German. He spoke vernacular like a connoisseur.

THURSDAY

Hando brought the account books to Reed and explained the difficult passages. Reed sat up in the guest bed with the books scattered around the quilt and interpreted figures while outside in the coffee estate agricultural servants weeded the plantations and swept the lanes between the silky-oaks.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the van Stopeles got up for lunch. Because neither seemed to recognize Hector Reed he introduced himself again and explained his mission. They seemed quite satisfied with his explanation but not completely satisfied with each other.

"You must not take too much notice of my wife," said Mr. van Stopele to Reed. "She is completely round the bend."

"You have a charming wife, sir."

It was not unusual to discover on lonely estates that long-standing companions tended to find each other's mannerisms irritating. Reed had a trick of pretending not to notice irritations in other people and he practised the trick now with the van Stopeles. In like manner Hando

the house-servant performed his duties with Oriental inscrutability and teutonic phlegm.

At the lunch table the four members of the household assembled in an atmosphere of mutual dislike. Hando served the food. Mr. van Stopele ate with voracious audibility. Mrs. van Stopele soon escaped from the dining-room into the dayroom. And Reed quickly followed her in the hope of getting beyond earshot of Mr. van Stopele's eating.

In the dayroom an English Spode coffee service was arrayed ready in a tray on an Egyptian pouf. Mrs. van Stopele sat on the divan against the wall and organized the dispensing of coffee.

"Men are always chasing me," she complained to Hector Reed as she poured coffee into three Spode cups. "Milk?"

"You are very attractive," Reed told her, taking a seat on a leopard-skin armchair. "No milk."

While he looked over at the wall decorations behind Mrs. van Stopele Reed became aware that she was conjuring a small paper sachet from a pocket inside the sleeve of her brocade housegown. He twitched his eyebrows. He tried not to stare as she put one or two heavy shakes of grey powder from it into one of the Spode coffee cups. Hando came into the dayroom with a carafe of fresh coffee and she quickly secreted the sachet in her hand. As he went out she threw the empty satchet into the hearth and the old fire revived momentarily. The logs that had flickered there for last night's bacchanalia were now no more than mixed-up grey matter along with the mangled memories.

A Chopin mazurka tinkled on the stereo hi-fi. In the dining-room Mr. van Stopele suddenly bellowed and in response there was a rapid pattering of Hando's bare feet.

The wall behind Mrs. van Stopele was decorated with bows and arrows, guns and rhino horns, and a moulded brass chameleon. At least the chameleon looked like moulded brass but soon it proved itself to be merely imitation moulded brass. The feral sounds of Mr. van Stopele's eating filtered through from the dining-room.

"You ought to consider yourself fortunate."

"I do. I do," said Reed.

He frowned at the cup she handed him. There was no trace of the grey powder in it. The powdered cup still sat on the pouf.

Hando could be heard gathering crockery in the dining-room. There was a long draught of beer by Mr. van Stopele. On the divan Mrs. van Stopele selected an unpowdered cup for herself. With studied negligence she laid one arm along the armrest of her divan. Lulu the lion girl.

The brass chameleon's eyesockets seemed to contain small sea-anemones. The sea-anemone eyeballs suddenly protruded and swivelled and Reed's whole attention jumped. He sat upright with a slight jerk. It was now apparent that the chameleon was not moulded brass after all. It was fully alive and clinging to the wall not fifteen inches from Mrs. van Stopele's well-nourished arm. Its skin gleamed with a metallic oiliness.

Reed's tensely brittle attitude seemed to denote mental conflict. He could tell Mrs. van Stopele of the chameleon's proximity and risk hysteria. Or he could say nothing and

risk abuse when the chameleon bit her. The thing to do was to break up the situation without her becoming aware of it.

Meanwhile, in the dining-room the luncheon sound-effects ceased while Mr. van Stopele growled instructions to Hando in vernacular. Something about a rifle.

"They say Australians are wonderful lovers," said Mrs. van Stopele.

"That's right," said Reed. The situation wrinkled his forehead.

Hando came through into the dayroom. He took down the anti-tank rifle from the decorated wall and the chameleon gave him a glance. He rubbed the rifle with a cleaning rag. His face was expressionless.

"But all men are reptiles," added Mrs. van Stopele as her husband choked on a swallow.

"Yes."

Just then Mr. van Stopele left the lunch table. His chewing got louder but his footsteps got softer as he came from buffed cedar boards on to the Persian weave of the dayroom.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"It must be time for your afternoon nap, Mrs. van Stopele."

She moved a finger in irritation and as a reflex the chameleon dabbed her finger accurately with its tongue at a foot range. Mrs. van Stopele shrieked and came off the divan like a springboard diver.

In the ensuing burst of activity Mr. van Stopele paid absolutely no attention to his wife. Reed had his sternum wedged up behind her shoulder blades and one of her

wrists grasped in each of his hands. Powerful squeals issued from the recently refuelled female body.

Mr. van Stopele ignored the powerful squeals. For Reed, because of her upholstered reinforcements, it was rather like embracing a wire cage full of ear-splitting parrots. The chameleon settled back into moulded brass immobility again.

"Help," said Reed as though to emphasize the non-romantic nature of his predicament.

Mr. van Stopele came quickly past the divan and snatched the anti-tank rifle from Hando. He pulled out the huge bolt, squinted down the barrel, swore in vernacular and gave Hando a clout on the ear. Then instead of pulping the chameleon or reviving his wife he took that anti-tank rifle out through the full-length windows and across the rooigras lawn to his workshop.

"I say, sir," Reed squeaked after him. "You have forgotten your coffee."

Reed's squeak was lost among Mrs. van Stopele's squeals. Hando stood motionless where the clout had overtaken him. Nor did he try to assist Mrs. van Stopele. As soon as Mr. van Stopele was out of sight Mrs. van Stopele became intelligible.

'Don't kill it. Don't kill it," she cried and took up her coffee to drink.

Reed released her from his straitjacket grip and she eyed the chameleon coldly. Reed did not kill it. He detached its suction feet from the wall and carried it outside to a thevetia tree on the lawn where it protruded its swivelling eyes on a praying mantis.

Reed went back inside the dayroom and nervously

loaded Tate's uncoloured crystals into the wrong cup and drank off the powdered coffee before becoming aware of it. Mrs. van Stopele's eyes swept on to the empty coffee cup and her painted lips quivered in laughter over her strong teeth.

"Have you ever been sick?" she asked mysteriously. "With love?"

"For me, madam, the condition is perennial."

With her husband out of sight, Mrs. van Stopele had regained her composure. She ran through the limited repertoire of her conversation while she eked out her coffee but finally a cold cup drove her away to her afternoon's nap.

Hando cleared away the coffee service. His *café-au-lait* face hung as expressionlessly as the folds of his gleaming neck-to-ankle smock.

"Tell me about this coffee we drink," said Reed. "Is it grown on the estate here?"

"Truly, guest," answered Hondo. "It is grown, dried, processed, roasted and ground. The estate does everything."

"Well, it tastes like burnt hair."

The dirty taste of the burnt coffee clouded Reed's mind for clerical work ahead. Left alone he uncovered the adding machine, filled his fountain pen, opened the account books and worked at his task of interpreting the financial position of the van Stopeles' estate. Soon the burnt-hair coffee in his interior became restless and he took it for a walk out past the thevetia tree on the lawn.

The praying mantis had vanished and the chameleon was imitation moulded brass again. From the lawn Mr.

van Stopele was visible in his workshop. He had a broken rhino horn in a bench vice and he was artistically shaping an artificial tip to it made of plastic putty. In colour and shape the plastic tip followed exactly the pattern of the genuine horn. He caught sight of Reed but did not pause in the work he was doing.

"Hullo," he growled. "Have you stopped playing around with my wife?"

"I have been examining the estate account books, sir," Reed replied stiffly.

"Are you a qualified auditor?"

"No need to be an auditor to appreciate the position."

"Yuh," said Mr. van Stopele and brought out a lot of bilious coughing to add brusqueness to his side of the conversation.

"The estate is bankrupt, sir."

"Oh? Don't you believe it."

"What I mean is: you cannot pay next month's wages."

"Can't I?"

He put the final touches to the artificial tip on the rhino horn and he took it out of the bench vice. He picked up the anti-tank rifle and dropped the metal tip on the end of a pull-through down inside the barrel. Spliced on to the back end of the pull-through was a hefty swab of cleaning rag.

Mr. van Stopele reversed the barrel by twirling a couple of muscular fingers. He seized the metal tip and wound two cord loops around his wrist. With the other hand steadying the barrel he took a breath. His chest swelled. The muscular armour across his chest jumped

into relief and the swab of cleaning rag swept through the constricted defile of the barrel with a smooth flourish.

"I can always pay my wages because I am in the rhino business."

"Oh!"

Now the rhino business was illegal but quite lucrative. First you hunted for a good-sized rhino horn. Then you killed the rhino attached to it. Next you cut off the good-sized horn and you sold it to an Asian dealer.

The Asian dealer would pay twenty shillings an ounce for rhino horn. He bought it to grind into powder. This powder was readily saleable as an aphrodisiac in the Orient, where it was believed to be a cure for frigidity, sterility, sexual-debility or just plain laziness.

The plastic putty tip which Mr. van Stopele had added to his rhino horn in the bench vice had probably increased the horn's weight by about fourteen or fifteen ounces. As long as the Asian dealer was stone blind or dead stupid Mr. van Stopele would receive three hundred extra shillings for the false tip.

Reed had a fleeting mental picture of a beautiful sareed lady in Calcutta quietly slipping powdered plastic putty into her husband's coffee.

"Come with me," invited Mr. van Stopele as he put together his anti-tank rifle, "and let us exploit the rhino business."

"All right."

"But as you can see. Taxation isn't a big item on this estate."

"Quite so. Quite so."

They walked across the lawns past a huge exotic

rockery into a patch of skeletonish coffee trees. A gang of agricultural workers was spraying dieldrine on to the trees. Farther on another gang was hoeing rich chocolate soil in preparation for fresh planting.

"You have spent a lot of money uselessly on that rockery," said Reed. "It would have been more sensible to concentrate on eradicating thrips from the coffee trees. Also rotary hoes would be more inexpensive than all that labour force."

"The rockery comes from the swimpool," explained Mr. van Stopele with a pig-like grunt. "I blasted it out with gelignite. My wife specially asked for a rockery but she has never looked after it."

They passed farm machinery and vehicles weather-beaten and rusting outside a first-class badminton court.

"That is an excellent hangar for badminton, Mr. van Stopele, but your vehicles are depreciating in the open air."

"My wife insisted on a badminton court. Although she has never really played on it."

They followed an avenue of oaks past the vast swimpool where workers were dipping buckets and carrying water to the coffee trees.

"The money you spent on gelignite should have been spent on a system of watering-pipes for the coffee trees."

"Your advice is all very sound. I suppose you are right, Reed. The fact is my wife demanded a swimpool. But, do you know, she has never really taken a swim in it."

The vast pool was sunk into volcanic rock. It was clear enough to see a young hippo strolling along the bottom under the diving-boards. The hippo dilated its lungs and

floated to the surface, snuffled a little, and sank again. Clumsy on land but light as a balloon in the deep swimpool.

Mr. van Stopele turned away from the swimpool and headed for high open bushland. He followed up a tongue of frothy solidified lava whose crevices and tunnels were filled with a gushing stream. He pushed his huge bulk up the tongue of lava with silent footsteps. He avoided debris and crevices with skilful twists of his athletic body.

A few spidery land crabs blew out of sight on flying tiptoes like fluff in a draught. A monitor lizard suddenly projected its body across the skyline with distended feet barely skimming the solid lava. Two hundred yards ahead a rounded boulder turned into a hog and charged away into the rain forest. Farther ahead an Egyptian goose battled for a while through shrubbery before taking to the air. But mostly it was as quiet as the sunshine which gave every detail unnecessary importance.

Hector Reed walked softly out of respect for this stealthy world where every creature lived as the end of a food chain and died to form a link in it. The lower branches of trees along the stream were stripped of bark. Rhinos' horns had dug caverns into the red cliffs and rhinos' tongues had polished the surfaces of the caverns in search of salt.

Reed kept about fifty yards behind Mr. van Stopele. In the event of needing to climb a tree at speed he did not wish to compete with him. Black-and-white colobus monkeys exploded into crashing noises in the high trees and Reed jumped nervously. Mr. van Stopele did not turn his head. Later, he turned his head about and seemed

to be sniffing the air. Quickly and without the slightest scraping of metal on rock he set up the anti-tank rifle and lay comfortably behind it.

Without waiting for instructions, Reed climbed a tree. This period of expectancy was being measured out by the cascade of water drops falling metallically into a distant pool. The silence of the rain forest moved in on the waiting men and the sound of the cascade became increasingly amplified. A brilliant green lizard with a top-heavy yellow head was nodding away the seconds on a slab of bare rock. Mr. van Stopele lay behind his anti-tank rifle like a sloppy sea-lion. He was placidly ruminating on the leaves of *Catha edulis*, the bushman's tea-plant which offers the stimulating alkaloid katine.

During the half-hour pause a small duiker ewe trotted out of the forest, looked at Mr. van Stopele and sped away among the maze of tree trunks in a miraculously-fast exhibition of eye-and-muscle co-ordination.

Not long afterwards an untidy tearing of trees and plants became audible at a short distance. With a swift silent convulsion of his whole body Mr. van Stopele came to his feet and lifted the anti-tank rifle. He took up a fresh position from where the faint breeze could carry his aroma towards the sound of untidy tearing. To enhance his aroma he urinated.

Silence again from the forest. The shadows of the trees lay in deep black pools about their roots and here and there where the sunlight caught them, a loop of monkey-vine or a beard of lichen stood out against the shadows like luminous paint finely drawn on carbon paper. Near the stream of solidified lava there was no smell of rotting

vegetation. Merely the sterile scentlessness left by the cauterizing rays of the sun. Reed ran his tongue over the sun-dried crackle of his lips. The air about him was warm and dry and where a patch of sunlight fell on his leg it burnt like a foment. The bark of the branch along which he lay left mottled embossments on his bare skin.

A pointed-mouth rhino with a good-sized horn came out of the forest on to the hard lava bed of the stream. Reed moved his fingers over the branch of his tree and clutched it far too tightly. The rhino could be likened unto a locomotive in a rage. Snorting escapes of steam. Grunt and clash of heavy equipment. Charging and shunting without obvious pattern. Piston-stamping during the stationary interval. Mr. van Stopele seemed to be drowsing in the prone position.

After it had fussed about for a while with apparently a concomitant building-up of emotional pressure, Mr. van Stopele gave a sharp whistle. The rhino immediately organized its random activity into a definite charge until it was transfixed by an armour-piercing slug from the anti-tank rifle. The roar of the rifle almost shook Reed off his branch.

The rhino was paralysed by the slug. It crashed inert on its side and the surrounding silence of the rain forest amplified the sound of pouring blood and of air being expelled from its anus. For a shuddering second a gale of air was drawn into the armour-plated lungs, then the air was explosively sent out as the final sigh in a furiously-contested life.

By the time Hector Reed had climbed down from his tree, agricultural servants were appearing from the estate

with heavy knives to cut up the dead rhino. They gave the big and little horns to Mr. van Stopele and began to cut up the rest of the rhino for drying.

On the walk back to the house Mr. van Stopele was swaggering. He spoke in a loud wild voice and gestured with the rifle as though it were a conductor's baton. The holstered revolver strapped to his muscular paunch went through a swinging choreography with every stride of his powerful legs.

"That ought to balance the books for a month or so," he growled in an amiable way.

"Unless you are planning more costly presents for your wife," said Reed, more or less to himself.

"My wife?" shouted Mr. van Stopele with a bellowing laugh. "My wife doesn't want presents. At least she wants them. See what I mean? But she doesn't really want to use them. Women are funny," he added with a rush of enthusiastic confiding.

"Women is a subject I know nothing about, sir," Reed assured him calmly.

"Mildred is slightly round the twist."

Reed did not answer and they walked on for a space. From the tongue of solidified lava they could look down through fold after fold of ridges thickly wooded. But beyond the last fold and purple with distance were the ugly fertile lowlands of Jamskoni and farther out the beautiful sterile snow-capped peaks of ancient volcanoes.

"She didn't want a rockery, or a badminton court, or a swimpool," Mr. van Stopele suddenly raved on. "She just wanted to test my desire for her."

His amiability was evaporating. The remnant of exhilara-

tion from his triumph over the rhino was congealing into compulsive denigration.

"I understand, sir," said Reed, although obviously he was lying.

The distant lowlands before them were spread out like a vast theatrical backdrop. Those lowlands must once have boiled like porridge. Now the stiffened bubbles were volcanic peaks. The whole picture was painted with sun patches stencilled by moving clouds.

"You can't climb into a man's skull and measure his desire with a ruler."

"Certainly not. No doubt about that."

"So you have to think up tricks."

"Oh! I see."

"You have to ask yourself: How much rock will he blast out for me? How big a rockery will he build?"

Reed grasped Mr. van Stopele's arm in sudden excitement. His voice was trembling with urgency.

"Look, sir," he said. "There is something wrong."

They were in sight of the long low house now and Hando the house servant came running to meet them. His neck-to-knee smock usually as white as coffee blossom was now a streaky geranium. For once his *café-au-lait* countenance had lost its habitual phlegmatic inscrutability. Hando was obviously a much upset man.

Behind the house, towards the servants' quarters the figure of the Ostrich could be seen. A gaunt bony figure still sporting the flying-helmet. Even at a distance the concern on his face was evident. He was shaking his head as though trying to convey something to Reed.

Before the breathless Hando could utter, Mr. van

Stopele snapped at him in vernacular. His short-lived exhilaration had completely left him now and he became again the man of action in a situation that suited him.

"Enough, enough," he snapped before Hando had said a word. "Just show me the trouble."

Hando's eyes were almost falling from their sockets. He led Mr. van Stopele and Hector Reed into the house through the wide glass windows. They all stepped across the Persian weave of the dayroom. Over the buffed cedar of the dining-room. Into the podo-boarded primitiveness of the large kitchen.

Mrs. van Stopele had killed herself in the kitchen. She had destroyed herself with gelignite. Death must have been instantaneous. It was also frightfully exaggerated.

"I never believed she would go so far," Mr. van Stopele muttered rather madly. For an insane moment it seemed as though he was referring to his wife's explosion trajectory. Maybe it was only a figure of speech.

Hector Reed's capacity for absorbing death had become saturated by the afternoon's events. He walked unsteadily out through the back doorway of the kitchen and the Ostrich placed a supporting hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry just now," he said quietly. "Let time go by for the moment."

He walked the silent Reed up and down the lawn for a while, then they stepped back into the dayroom. Mr. van Stopele was there. Silent and alone. His face was as grey and crumpled as old shrouds.

"You better lie down, sir," said Reed in a grey voice. Distractedly, Mr. van Stopele toyed with a bird bow

and two or three bolts pulled down from the dayroom wall.

"I had a great passion for her once," he said to no one in particular. "I suppose that's what gave me a soiled mind."

He fiddled with the bow. He lined up a bolt and flicked it away. He did not appear to aim it but it slipped through the wide glass doors, skewered the chameleon and carried it ten feet past the thevetia tree. The Ostrich jerked in astonishment.

"But she tried me too much."

Now Mr. van Stopele was bending the bird bow by wringing his hands wretchedly. Fibrous damage in the bow became audible. After this strain it could not hurl the next bolt farther than the wide glass doors.

"And in the end I overcame my weakness."

He dropped the ruined bow into the hearth where it smouldered and smoked for a space on the hot ashes and suddenly burst into flame.

"I see," said Hector Reed.

"She must have been bitterly disappointed," sighed Mr. van Stopele.

"She must have been very unhappy."

"She even tried flirting with you."

"She must have been desperate."

"She was trying to make me jealous again."

"Why don't you lie down, sir?"

The late afternoon sun shot a slender ray in horizontally through the glass doorway which limned the twisted lines on the Ostrich's face into dramatic caricatures of Lucifer's malevolence.

"You saw her," continued Mr. van Stopele, who seemed unaware of the Ostrich's presence. "She even tried putting that powdered rhino horn into my coffee."

"Odd idea." Reed put a hand over his stomach.

"Death was the only remedy. Never leave a beast in misery."

"Quite so," said the Ostrich. His voice was a scratchy gramophone needle on the elegiac confessions.

Mr. van Stopele's voice was old and tired.

"No niggers in my house."

"But Mr. Ostrich is a candidate at the next elections," explained Hector Reed. "He may be our next Member of Parliament."

"Out," came Mr. van Stopele's gasping voice. "Get out the back. I don't mind niggers as long as they are kept in their place."

"Actually, you know," said the Ostrich, in his best ham and eggs, "I am only the District Commissioner's office boy. I've got as much chance of winning the next election as an ice cream in hell."

The tone in Mr. van Stopele's voice was deepening. Shock-fatigue was leaving him and his large body was twitching into vertical rigidity again with spasms of muscular energy. The Ostrich was looking around the walls of the dayroom with undisturbed attention. Some of the tips of the rhino horns were unusually long, as though they had been artificially added. Mr. van Stopele pulled the slimy black revolver from the holster on his paunch and waved it at the Ostrich. He did something with his thumb and the revolver clicked loudly.

"You are trespassing," he said to the Ostrich.

"I am admiring your trophies," said the Ostrich. "You know they are illegal?"

"Out," said Mr. van Stopele. "God knows I've had enough to put up with."

"Look here, sir, why don't you take a little rest? Mr. Ostrich and I will look after things for a while."

"We will look after things," said the Ostrich.

The scene was not devoid of the dramatic. The muscular paunchy Mr. van Stopele, holding a revolver in a hand which did not shake with the emotional strain he had been through. The bony, gangling Ostrich grinning with lunatic smoothness as he stepped clumsily about the dayroom. And Hector Reed, white of face, wrinkling his forehead into corrugated terrain as he looked from Mr. van Stopele to the Ostrich and back again. Mr. van Stopele's breath was clearly audible as high-pitched inhalations. The sweat from his afternoon's exercise suddenly seemed to fill the dayroom.

"Five minutes to be off my property." His words were jumbled in with a bellow of coughs. The greyness of his face was gone to be replaced by ruddy healthiness. Situations were beneficial for Mr. van Stopele.

"Five minutes will suffice, what?" said the Ostrich. He turned and faced the revolver in Mr. van Stopele's firm hand and he gave it a maniacal grin.

He walked to the wall and broke off the tip of a rhino horn with little trouble. The horn looked on the outside like genuine horn but it was really painted plastic putty. As the Ostrich's fingers worked on it the anatomy of that rhino horn became revealed.

Inside the covering of plastic putty was a packed core

of gelignite. And, of course, inside that core of gelignite, for a small yellow kernel, was a bright detonator. Hector Reed stopped looking at the revolver. His eyes seemed hypnotized by the Ostrich's demonstration.

" 'Struth," he said.

"Just kind of imagine, old bean. Say you wanted to get a supply of powdered rhino horn. You might start by feeding the tip of this horn into the coffee grinder in the kitchen."

The revolver in Mr. van Stopele's hand was no longer steady. He put it in the holster. He went to the sideboard and fixed himself an amber-coloured drink from several bottles. He drank quickly.

Without looking around he went out through the wide glass doors and across to his workshop.

"Murder," breathed Reed. "He knew she used to grind that powder."

"Maybe not, old chum. For a lady like Mrs. van Stopele the idea of fixing suicide up to look like murder is not out of character."

"Unthinkable," said Reed.

"These coffee estates are a long way from organized law. Strange things happen all the time. Suicide is not uncommon for people who live this lonely luxurious life. Armed fights with neighbours are not unusual. Symptoms of psychosis are even considered normal."

"Yeah," said Reed. "All the same. You know."

The light from the imminent sundown, yellow as old paper, diffused gently in the dayroom. Outside the same light seemed to endow every blade of grass on the lawn with bristling harshness. In through the window of his

workshop Mr. van Stopele was visible as he bent over the newly-won rhino horns from the afternoon's hunt. In that sundown light the moist sun-blackened skin on his forearms had an iridescent effect rather like oil on metal.

"You know what he is doing," said the Ostrich. "He's fixing up another one of those damned horns."

"I think I have had enough for a while," said Reed haggardly. He slumped down on the divan and allowed his limbs to hang loosely. He closed his eyes.

"You'd like to be back selling television sets. A tedious existence perhaps. But so kind on the guts."

"Is there any point in waiting around here?"

"None at all, I imagine, old chum."

Hector Reed and the Ostrich jeeped out to the private airstrip and flew the Leopard-Moth back to civilization without delaying further. Jamskoni administrative centre was not really civilization, but after the luxury life of that opulent household it seemed like it. The dead elephant was now more powerful in stench than before but after the heady atmosphere of the van Stopeles' it smelled almost appetizing.

In Hector Reed's work cell there were one or two matters demanding attention. While the Ostrich talked to a visiting headman about the erecting, mudding, dunging and thatching of a new coffee factory for a Jamskoni tribal clan, Reed got on with the tedium of making a copious report on his visit to the van Stopeles' coffee estate. By the time he had worked down to the place for the witness's signature, curfew had sounded and the visiting headman took his leave.

The District Commissioner and his gang of pseudo-

gangsters arrived back at the cess barrier at curfew hour. Reed hurried out of his work cell to help them check Patchett guns and grenades into the armoury.

"I suppose you are looking forward to a clean up and a rest?" Reed said to the filthy, weary men.

"We want a clean up," said the District Commissioner, "right after the party."

"Fine, sir. Where is the party?"

"Your place, of course. Ha! You've got all that brandy from the club fund."

When they reached Reed's house accoutrements for the party were quickly assembled. Furniture was covered with bed sheets as protection against smudgy skin colour of the pseudo-gangsters. Bottles in platoon formation on all flat surfaces. Soon the air became mottled with tobacco smoke and the parquet became perilous with Patchett rounds spilled from the pockets of scrappy uniforms.

Kangai moved about busily amid the preparation. Her brown bare arms, wholesome as new-made bread, and her saree skirt, taut as a well-filled sail, manœuvred choreographically as she worked. When her melancholy lips began to lift monotonously in Reed's direction and her eyes followed him with obvious single-mindedness, Reed thanked Kangai for her work and told her sharply that she was dismissed.

She moved reluctantly out through the kitchen and her key was heard to grind painfully as she locked the kitchen door from the outside.

"That's the girl from the office boy's family," pointed out the District Commissioner, as he swirled an inch or two of the club-fund brandy around his glass.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ostrich said she is an orphan. Some thing like that."

"Bit of Asian in her, I'd say. Probably Sikh."

Reed told the District Commissioner of the events at the estate of the van Stopeles but the District Commissioner did not appear to attach great importance to them.

"The big problem in Jamskoni", he explained, "is the suppression of gangsterism. We just haven't got the men to referee squabbles between settlers."

"I see, sir."

"Unfortunately, gangsters know the district better than we do. Many of them, I must admit, are very courageous and resourceful people. But they do not represent the majority. And I can never agree with the oaths they swear as part of their induction. There's no need to have any qualms about resisting them, Reed. If the word evil has any meaning at all, then that's what they are."

The commissioner's face was still streaked with the burnt cork of his disguise. He gave a weary smile that took none of the rumples out of his caterpillar eyebrows. His voice scraped and grated like a jammed gatling.

Some of the administrative officers were playing parlour games with a fervour usually reserved for the football field. One of them was kneeling blindfolded with a stick of kindling in his hand. The idea was to touch him without receiving a vicious crack from the stick. The shouts of excitement and the blows from the stick formed a noisy background to the District Commissioner's conversation. The thick drapes over the louvred window held a bouquet of vertical shadow-stripes behind the darting figures. The smell of damp leaf mould was still attached to their oil-

skin garments. Their faces were tight with fatigue but their hunger for co-operation and social activity kept them at their senseless game. The brandy they were drinking bit the tongue severely and brought tears to their youthful eyes. Heat from the fireplace was making the air in the living-room oven-dry.

"How you fingling along in Jamskoni anyway, Reed?" asked the commissioner. "Find it interesting?"

His eyes glittered with the brandy but there was only hollowness behind the glitter. Two nights of sleeplessness and discomfort against a rebel force who could easily form the next government of the land.

"I don't know. Not exactly what I expected."

"You thought it would be like the movies. I know. I thought the same thing when I came out. Soon found my mistake. Same colours of course. Same animals. Same thrills and excitement. But there are never any intervals for popcorn. That's the big trouble." His voice was fading from fatigue for boredom was wearing him out. "You can get very tired of being in the show twenty-four hours every day."

"I've sometimes wondered how I was accepted for this job. You know. I didn't really seem to have the background. . . ."

"Colonial service isn't what it used to be, Reed. I'll tell you a fact. Yours was the only application."

"I see, sir."

"Now, don't be dejected. You don't appreciate Jamskoni while you are here. None of us do. It's only when you leave that you realize it. I tried once. I thought that the ideal life for me would be sitting in a Soho restaurant

and eating spaghetti Bolognese, with a pick-up wailing 'Arrivederci Roma' and Latin mannequins coming through between the tables. I tried it and I would have loved it if I could have forgotten the blue lagoons along the coast out here. And the women coming into town with piles of blue dates balanced on their heads in tamarisk containers. You know. There is something about the way these people can burn out the shape of a dhow. Somehow the shape is always so—ah—inspired. And talking of inspired shapes, Reed. . . ."

The administrative officers had stopped playing and were now drinking steadily. Some of them lay on the polished parquet. Their glossy oilskins made them look like huge grotesque beetles. Their voices were harsh and incessant as they argued over some insignificant matter.

Kangai had come back into the living-room. She stood at the doorway leading to the rear and looked at the beetles about her. She raised her forehead and looked down through her purple lashes.

". . . I don't think you are sensible having that girl in your house."

Reed strove not to watch Kangai as she turned and walked out of the living-room. The firelight found fascinating facets of her healthy skin as her firm laminated flesh manœuvred sweetly. That healthy skin and elastic flesh meant that she was clean right through. Not like some women. The majority probably. Who were carapaced in crinkly fat with a collection of untidy and badly-serviced organs inside. Reed pressed his teeth together till they ground.

"I agree, sir."

The descending moon was searing a red-hot hole through the spangled velvet fabric of the tranquil night when the party reluctantly dispersed. Three days remained for the moon to reach its full maturity. Already it was a glaring searchlight picking out every blade of grass on the lawns. As the tail lights were switched on in the bevy of bush vehicles cluttering the lawn, the claret pinpricks were feeble indeed under the moon. Rugged vehicle engines revved up until they were a chorus of deep-toned vibrations. The clear night air became foul with engine fumes. And one by one the vehicles swung over the lip of the volcanic crater and hurtled savagely down the tortuous track. In Jamskoni no one boasted of driving safely.

After the last administrative officer had departed Hector Reed stood on the moonlit edge of the escarpment quite motionless for a long time. Among the streaks of mist forming out of the cooling air he could have been mistaken for a termite heap. Dew was condensing on the bristling blades of grass. A long way off an elephant called. At his feet the administrative centre was a dead vortex of spiralled cloud.

On the far side of the clipped lawns the bright red flowers of the corkbark trees were ebony black in the misty moonlight. The fine branches were a white spiderweb against the shadows under the thatching of Kangai's quarters. Inconspicuous sounds of human movement came from that direction. A hurrying barn owl came over the lip of the escarpment in a sudden whisper of rumpled air and was gone long before Reed stepped back and threw his hands in front of his face. The reaction was

enough to revitalize him. He drove his hands into his trouser pockets. He hunched his shoulders and walked across the lawn in the direction of Kangai's quarters. After a few steps he turned about. He came back to the edge of the lawn again and froze into a termite heap. The morning mist was thickening perceptibly. The first drips came down from the eaves of the stone house like kettle-drum taps. The smell of sandy dampness became evident. The crisp coldness of the night air seemed to become blunted. Reed bent his head and remained immobile.

The door handle of Kangai's quarters squeaked and two or three vernacular phrases tumbled out to seep quickly through the mist. The phrases were incomprehensible but the voice was the Ostrich's. Kangai's reply was the warm breathless tone of a tender unworried female. Hector Reed made no movement.

The Ostrich moved out from the corkbark trees and climbed towards the turfy highlands. His figure was a spider-spare silhouette moving through grey-blueness. The mist dissolved him completely but his course was betrayed by the click of his automobile door farther up the slope. The damp tyres squelched as the brakes were released. Without lights the Ostrich coasted almost silently down past the stone house. He waited until gravity had taken him to the sandy floor of the volcanic crater before switching on his engine and driving home to the Premji Drycleanery.

Reed waited until Kangai's door clicked shut, then he went to bed.

FRIDAY

Hector Reed was awakened at dawn by the click of his bedroom windows. Because of the pneumatic constitution of his stone house the bedroom windows clicked each time the front door opened. There was no other sound, but a current of cold air cut along the passageway from the living-room into the bedroom. Reed got out of bed immediately. The twisted bed sheets had left floral patterns on his sunburnt flesh. He twisted on a Jamskoni waist shawl to disguise his lack of pyjamas and ghosted through to the bathroom where he picked up his virgin forty-four from the medicine shelf. He pushed the forty-four between the shawl and his waist. It pinched a cleft in his chilling flesh. Reed stepped into the living-room.

The front door was open all right. A visitor was standing by the fireplace where the dying warmth of the old fire could reach him. He was leaning on his own spear in a casual attitude and staring at the six-o-six which lay along the nail-studded mantelshelf. He was a very small man, with arms and legs, like mouldering sticks, half-enveloped in a dung-coloured blanket. Occasionally a

shimmy made of leopard skin was visible through the blanket folds. A horizontal ray from the six o'clock sun caught the natural horniness of his bare foot.

"Muga mono," said Reed to the small visitor.

"Muga," returned the visitor. Then he added in traditional vernacular: "What is your news of many days?"

Many days? Reed had never seen him before.

From the kitchen at the rear of the stone house came the scrape and subdued clatter of utensils as Kangai prepared the morning tea. There was the long bubbling hiss of boiling water being poured into a teapot and the fragrance of concentrated dried tea leaves drifted through the living-room.

"My news is excellent," said Reed automatically.

"Excellent," said the visitor. His face was formed like lava dribblings with tufts of beard as though he had half-heartedly shaven with a broken bottle. He wore a hat with a two-foot brim made of buffalo hide. This hat had loops on it so it could be hung on the arm; a shield as tough as galvanized iron. He changed his posture slightly and the blade of a panga knife came into view dangling beside his short thin leg.

"Now I bring you a present," said the visitor and he spat on the broad blade of his spearhead. He rubbed the broad blade around the inside of the fireplace in much the same way that you rub dull razor blades around the inside of a glass tumbler.

"Excellent," said Reed.

The rear entrance to the living-room opened and Kangai came through carrying tea things on a woven-grass

tray. She gave a short giggle and stood still abruptly on the polished parquet. Horizontal sunlight smacked the louvred slats of the wall-sized window right across the living-room so that Kangai's green servant's gown took on the gaiety of striped raiment. The tea cup clicked against the saucer once or twice and then rattled softly.

Hector Reed turned his head sharply to glare at Kangai and his eyebrows were heavy bars of hatred lowered across his eyes. His ribs heaved for a short space as though he were a drowning man unable to speak and his puffs of breath were audible as gasps and visible as condensed steam in the cold air.

"Cups. Two," he suddenly snarled and he thrust two fingers at Kangai as though they were knives aimed at her throat.

Kangai gave a half-giggle and returned to the kitchen. Reed stood glaring after her with his ribs still heaving and his teeth showing through an ugly slant in his mouth. The visitor gave his spearhead an extra scrape and Reed seemed to pull himself together. He turned back to the fireplace.

"No good. Sorry," he said, masticating his vernacular vocabulary. "Girl. Young. Bad. Filthy. Evil. Stinking."

The visitor's shoulders shook slightly and a great deal of the stiff tension seemed to go out of his face. He did not actually smile. But the expression on his face was solemn rather than spiteful.

"A present," said the visitor and he offered Reed a wrist loop made from the tail sinews of a giraffe. Reed's ears moved perceptibly as his forehead smoothed and he gave a short laugh. These wrist loops were cut from graz-

ing giraffes as proof of a young man's ability to stalk. They were said to be extremely lucky for the wearer.

"Praise be to Allah," recited Reed as he slipped his hand through the loop.

"And now", said the visitor, making for the door, "remain in peace."

"Wait," cried Reed. "Cup of tea."

The visitor hesitated as though undecided. Absent-mindedly he licked his spearhead to test its sharpness.

"When a man is thirsty he must drink," he quoted an ancient Jamskoni proverb. "But I am not thirsty."

"Go in peace," said Reed and shook hands. The palm of the visitor's hand was a bas-relief of horniness. A stifled giggle came from the kitchen and Reed gave the visitor's hand a grip that made his eyes open wider. He had to take a pinch of snuff to recover his composure.

But at the moment of departure the visitor appeared to remember what he had come for.

"Forgive me for troubling you," he said, "but my supply of kitchen salt is at an end."

"Kangai," bellowed Reed and the force behind the name made the veins in his neck stand out. She put a round-eyed face this side of the door jamb and the fresh pigment on her lips formed an enlarged circumference.

"Salt. Kitchen salt. Bring it all!"

With athletic facility Kangai swung a half-sack of snow-white deliquescence out of the kitchen into the living-room. The visitor twisted a horny hand round its ear and carried the kitchen salt out of the front door and into the thickening sunlight without another word. He left nothing except a few dewy footprints on the polished

parquet and a lucky wrist loop. And a faint stench reminiscent of the rotting elephant.

Hector Reed ate his breakfast in surly silence. Kangai seemed eager for a discussion but Reed spent all his attention overtly on the rich green flesh of the half-avocado and the long cold draught of undiluted grapefruit juice. The lush folded omelette with the whites beaten separately was tangy with lumps of mushroom. He stood outside on the dew-soaked lawn drinking his tea while the table things were being taken out to the kitchen. The ascending sun was warm on his naked skin. The lawn pressed bristling criss-crosses into the bare soles of his feet. Far out on the grazing plains he could see seven or eight elephants in line like snails across a yellow tablecloth. The volcanic crater had trapped several strands of mist which rolled around like slow-motion surf up to an island coast.

The great benefit in Jamskoni district was the breathtaking scenery and the invigorating air. Hector Reed noted with satisfaction the warm suntan accumulating on his clear skin as he took a shower in the tiled bath. But the snatches of song which came to him from Kangai in the kitchen drove all his vigour into a sharp wedge of resentment. He dried off quickly and stepped into thick white ankle socks and ankle boots. His khaki shirt was still warm from the smoothing iron and his khaki shorts were starched enough to stand up by themselves. Then he loped briskly out of earshot of the song in the kitchen and coaxed asthmatic coughs from his clapped-out bush vehicle on the precipitous track down to the administrative centre.

The District Commissioner was wearing his spectacles as he pinned coloured threads across his wall map. He

explained to Reed as he worked that the coloured threads marked the routes covered by his patrols. Where the routes had proved unfruitful the threads were yellow in colour. But where the District Commissioner had had the great good luck to get his administrative officers maimed or killed the threads became red. The more patrols the District Commissioner recorded the more Jamskoni district suffered from yellow jaundice and the more the gangster haunts became delineated as areas of inflamed abscesses.

"I have been wondering if my salary is sufficient to keep me in Jamskoni, sir," said Reed.

"Tourists pay thousands of pounds to be in your position," said the District Commissioner. He did not take his attention off the wall map. "You notice that we started at the highest tip of the permanent ice cap. See? Jamskoni district is a pocket handkerchief with one corner in the clouds and the other corner in the ocean. But from the gangsters' point of view we can forget all about the hot plains and the warm grazing areas. As a general rule, you know, the gangsters live up among the cold rain forests and glaciated moorlands. And it's the respectable tax payers who live down in the warm."

"I have already watched respectable tax payers in action," said Hector Reed. "I attended one of the Ostrich's political meetings."

The District Commissioner bent his balding sun-peeled skull down so that he could look at Reed over his spectacles. The end of his top lip drew up over long stained teeth in the kind of a smile you see on a spitting leopard. His eyes blinked like a hippo's nostrils.

"Oh, come now, Reed," said the District Commissioner in a schoolmaster's voice. "You're not going to complain about a little fun?"

"Is there any real way of knowing who is gangster and who is respectable?"

"Ha! Let me see now. The gangster is usually scruffier. You know. Lets his hair grow. Bits of beard. And of course they often dress in animal skins and skimpy sorts of uniforms. They carry home-made guns. The gangster leader will often wear a tremendous flat hat. All that sort of nonsense."

"Huh."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I see, sir."

"Naturally. Ha! Sometimes other people get mixed up with the gangsters. And vice versa. During the last long dry we used to shoot twenty-five pounders up at the gangsters. As a result many tax payers joined the gangsters to get a cut at the supplies of fresh-killed elephant meat up in the rain forests."

"I am not sure, sir, that I am altogether out of sympathy with the gangsters. Seems to me——"

"I know, Reed. I've been through the same mental exercise. You can take it from me your sympathy is misplaced. But once you meet real gangsters you will have no more doubts."

"Oh!"

The District Commissioner wrapped his eyebrows into a crumpled frown and his eyeballs became swollen and suffused.

"Anyway. Listen to this," he said hoarsely. "The time

to adopt a definite opinion is after you have inspected a specimen of gangsterism. Any other attitude is too—ah—suspect."

"Very good, sir."

"Now the moon goes down pretty late tonight. But we can count on some mist to cover it in the early hours. I can introduce you to some gangsterism. Just leave it to me, Reed. . . ."

Hector Reed left it to the District Commissioner. He checked the six-o-six. Filled a water-bottle with club-fund brandy. Notified half a dozen tribal policemen. And went to sleep during the hot afternoon. When he awoke he kept his eyes shut. In the bedroom with the drapes drawn was the almost non-existent smell of crushed grass which emanated from Kangai in her more receptive moments. There was the whispering friction of gauze saree on moving thighs and a scraping jerk at the drapes to obliterate the fine splinter of light which had forced its way in between the fabric from the harsh troublesome world outside.

Once or twice came the clip-clop of the household sandals but even this was muted. Reed's breathing had changed to a faster rhythm at the moment of awakening but he remained as still as a murky conscience.

The total silence for the next few minutes did not conceal the presence of movement. Small eddies of dry air in the darkened bedroom left transient fingers of coolness on Reed's bare body. The mattress sheet pulled softly as Kangai's weight pressed in a crouched sitting position on the edge of the bed. Reed's skin barely rippled from the tea-coloured hands which played over it like grazing

tadpoles. He let out his breath in a sigh which seemed to change gear once or twice and he tasted again the wet warm flutter of Kangai's pink tip.

When he opened his eyes he saw no smile on Kangai's pigmented lips. If anything the expression could be called one of scholarly mournfulness. For a space there was the usual motionless concentration of two minds exploring each other's risks and possibilities. Then Reed shuddered. He drew his arms behind his head and stretched to the limits of his muscular powers. Then his body flexed suddenly like a trap-spring at the solar plexus and Kangai was a supple captive entwined among his arms and legs.

At sundown Kangai's expression of scholarly mournfulness was no longer in evidence. Her slant-eyes had opened to wide-open roundness and her milk-white teeth were displayed in a clean pink mouth which opened wider than Reed would have thought possible.

Kangai danced as though she were scarcely touching the polished parquet through the manœuvrings involved in entwining her evening saree and her voice crept softly out in a whispered song of joyfulness.

Reed himself went about the business of living with enhanced zest. He ate like a horse. And later, on the track down to the administrative centre he managed to get quite a canter out of the old bush vehicle. He strode sturdily into the office where the District Commissioner was cursing the failing light which terminated his day's drudgery and said in a loud clear voice: "I am ready, sir."

"That is splendid. You can help me with the weapons in the armoury." He squinted at the wall map and indi-

cated a fresh yellow thread which started on the glacial heights and came down through rain forest towards the grazing areas. "With any luck we will be able to change some of the yellow thread to red."

"Yes, sir."

The moon was already high in the afterglow. The District Commissioner and Reed worked through the accountancy necessary to check ammunition and weapons out of the armoury. Six tribal policemen folded themselves in under the tattered canopy. The District Commissioner kept up a cheerful chatter with them in vernacular as Reed drove out through the cess barrier and away across the floor of the crater. Reed leaned forward over the steering wheel to give himself maximum field of observation. The tribal policemen roared with laughter at the District Commissioner's jokes. The engine of the bush vehicle droned steadily in the evening air. And the wheels sang on the sand which was a metallic blue under the climbing moon.

Soon the bush vehicle reached the periphery of the sea-smooth floor and the treads on the little tyres bit into the ascending mountain road like ratchet cogs on an alpine railway. The road twisted and snaked treacherously as it ascended. It slipped through a line of breakers formed by evergreen oaks and then it was tumbling among the gigantic woof and warp of the surface roots which poured out from the crowded trees in the rain forest. The canopy of leafage overhead held the forest in solid blackness, except for an occasional tear which allowed a flake of moonlight to flicker over the bush vehicle in explosive intensity. Reed drove a lot more slowly. The faded beams

on his ancient headlamps drew wrinkled facial expressions from the tortured tree trunks. Already sharp rags of mist had lifted a foot or two from the roadway and in the headlamps the bush vehicle seemed to be speeding silently through a barricade of glass splinters. It was like driving through hell. On a mild and fragrant night.

"In about five minutes", said the District Commissioner, "I want you to switch off your lights and put the vehicle out of sight behind a tree. Somewhere. Then we will sit in the car for half an hour to see if anyone objects to our presence."

"Very good, sir."

The darkness was too extreme for the eyes to become adjusted to it. The forest quietness was now and then broken by a sharp crack from the cooling engine and by a series of spitting coughs which meant they were parked too near the home of a cat or a pig or a squirrel or even a bird.

It seemed that the entire patrol must have fallen asleep when the District Commissioner murmured "Start now, men" in vernacular and the eight men were on their way almost before the order was completed.

"We follow the road to the moorland plateau," said the District Commissioner as they walked briskly upwards, "then we swing down on a compass bearing through the trees straight back to the vehicle. Simple, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Hector Reed. He took a gulp at the clean night air.

They moved along centipede-file with their footsteps muffled by roadway dust and the District Commissioner questioned Reed about his household arrangements.

"If you have any irritations better to let me know."

"The house is functioning fine," said Reed.

"I think you have been victimized a bit with that half-Asian servant."

"She cooks very well, sir."

As the District Commissioner explained it the trouble was not with Kangai's cooking but with her background.

"You see," he pointed out, "the old office boy just had to get rid of her. He palmed her off on you. She used to live down with the family at the drycleanery."

"It was good of the Ostrich to let me have her. Don't you think?"

"Good?" A laugh from the District Commissioner like a power shovel clearing a trench. "Depends on what you mean by good. His wives wouldn't stand any more. He had to get rid of her."

"What? Wives? Whose wives?"

"The Ostrich. As you call him. Now, don't worry. I don't mean he is immoral or anything like that. He's only got the regulation three."

"I see, sir."

And not immoral, eh? Reed continued to keep up with the patrol but he did not speak for a long time and the briskness had vanished from his marching. He stumbled a good deal over ground roots and the six-o-six sagged one shoulder lower than the other.

The patrol came out into unimpeded moonlight on the plateau. They traversed a little and then turned down again into the darkening forest. Their compass bearing took them on a leg-bending hill and dale course whereas the roadway had avoided all that with zigzags.

"I have been thinking," said Reed, after stumbling for a while over elevated country in total blackness in company with the District Commissioner, "I don't think I can live on my miserly rate of pay, sir."

"I see," said the District Commissioner. "Keep your voice down."

Reed could not see the District Commissioner. He steered his boots by the sound of his voice. The boots made no sound except here and there where the dust had thinned out.

"And I am worried stiff, sir."

"Can you pay your bar bill?" inquired the commissioner. Then he added: "Watch out for puff adders."

The harder you watch out the blacker the night becomes. By daylight puff adders are as gaudy as sunburnt Pommies. But at night they are invisible.

"I might have trouble paying my grocery bill, sir," said Reed.

Puff adders have slant-sharp hypodermic needles for stings and they wait here and there to inoculate mammals like you and me with haemotoxin. This haemotoxin flushes through you like myxomatosis through a rabbit. It makes all your blood vessels leak. Reed took high steps on the points of his boots.

"And survival seems impossible," he added.

"The Hindoo grocery will give you credit," said the District Commissioner. "There is a government school ahead. We have to check it."

The point of Reed's boot prodded a puffiness. Maybe elephant dung. But he did a worried-stiff dance which added emphasis to his next words.

"I don't want credit," he yapped. "I want security."

"Sh," said the District Commissioner and Reed stopped dancing. The six tribal policemen knelt in a circle with their regimental shotguns pointed outwards. Reed could not see them but he knew their drill.

From the leafage overhead came an explosion of sounds that resembled all the gangsters on the mountains behind one panga-knife charge. Instead of gangsters however the sounds were mostly baboons. Muffled through the beginnings of morning mist came their abrupt tenor barks as they tore the lips and ears of a serval cat. Mixed with the tortured screams of the torn cat the maniacal tenor barks reassured the District Commissioner.

"Proceed," he said calmly and the six tribal policemen stood up.

"Financially," Reed proceeded, "I had much more security as a television-set salesman."

"Go on," said the commissioner. "I'll veer slightly and we'll meet behind the government school."

The District Commissioner veered slightly. Reed went on. And the tribal policemen formed another kneeling circle. Reed went on until he collided with the thatched eaves of the government school. From the collision he ricocheted and touched a stone window-sill. He put the foresight of the six-o-six over the window-sill and pushed one eye forward after it. The government school was as black as a puff adder's soul.

Reed moved on and touched the next window-sill. The government school was as quiet as a puff adder's pulse.

At the next window-sill the breeze from a sharp hiss made Reed's forward eye blink. He danced back to avoid

an inoculation of haemotoxin and the sharp hiss came again: "Sh."

With a choke of exasperation Reed ejaculated: "You bloody fool, sir."

"Keep your voice down," murmured the District Commissioner. "I think we are in luck."

"Splendid," said Reed, trembling with fright.

Behind them in the kneeling circle six hammers clicked back into six trigger locks. A small vibration like the scream of a housefly came from the interior of the government school and the six tribal policemen adjusted their postures. Mentally Reed could see six regimental shotguns aimed through him at that vibration.

"Go round behind the school", directed the District Commissioner, "and drive them this way."

"Eh?"

Then the thought of those six shotguns aimed through him sent Reed's legs round behind the school with astonishing velocity. As soon as he was shielded by the school he dragged the cork stopper from his water-bottle and took the largest mouthful possible of neat brandy therefrom. So large was this mouthful that his cheeks were distended under pressure and every taste bud was jabbed as though with broken glass.

Reed leaned the six-o-six against the window-sill and struck a match. He expelled the brandy out through tight lips with the kind of force used to blow an army bugle. The brandy came out in a fine spray like insecticide out of a Flit gun. With the match Reed ignited the fine spray.

Immediately flames flowed across the window-sill and filled the government school. Flames lapped up past the

rafters and scraps tore off from the main conflagration and blew out among the swirling shadows. The dry thatching above the rafters caught alight so that even when the pressurized mouthful was exhausted, flames continued to wave and writhe and after that images in the eyeballs aggravated the effect.

After expelling all the brandy Reed threw an attempt at a war yell across the stone window-sill into the government school. The yell that came back like an amplified echo could have been seven hundred serval cats synchronized on torture racks.

Not long afterwards Reed lay breathless behind the massive bolt of the six-o-six about two hundred yards from the government school. Action inside the school sounded like steam-rollers in a polo match rather than resistance from a horde of gangsters. To judge from the crashing masonry and splintering rafters the gangsters were disdaining doorways and merely exuding through the stone walls.

"Tallyho," cried the District Commissioner from the front of the government school and gunshot hosed outward in six directions simultaneously from the kneeling circle of tribal policemen.

Reed thumbed the safety catch of the six-o-six and fingered the trigger and as usual his shoulder was all but dislocated. His ear drums were almost carried away. And far out on the grazing area a hot slug penetrated thirty feet of topsoil.

All sounds of flight were soon lost in the roaring of flames. Reed trotted round to the front of the government school. With the reflected lights from the burning building

playing across the weary folds of his face the District Commissioner looked a crumpled mask for a carnival. He looked at Reed with interest.

"I did not know you were worried about salary, Reed," he said.

"What's that? Well. It's not just that."

"You mean there is something else?"

Reed's face was sagging with fatigue and frustration. He seemed to have difficulty over his words. "No," he said after a grinding pause. His voice was colourless. "Just financial worry."

Grey-green light illuminated ragged shreds of mist about the patrol and far out on the grazing areas sunshine struck through in warm yellow blobs. Old-men's-beard hanging from the crowded trees reaped a ghostly harvest of seaweed vapour. The column of rising sparks above the half-destroyed school pushed back the dawn for a while, but soon the charred remnants of thatch and the gaping holes in the stone walls were plainly visible.

"I am fairly sure we can offer you a more attractive salary."

Reed did not answer. He was looking hard at the ground.

As daylight grew stronger the footprints of an elephant became visible. Each footprint obliterated the thin layer of grey surface dust to reveal bright red topsoil underneath. Each footprint was delineated sharply as though painted in fresh red. Because of the sharpness of the wet-paint effect it seemed that the elephant had sailed past only a short while earlier.

In the black recesses of his memory tamped down by swirling flames and ear-splitting gunshots and the smell

of cordite Reed examined again the gigantic yell that had emanated from the government school.

"Hardly," said Reed aloud but to no one in particular. "Hardly would an elephant go into a government school."

But the gaping holes in the stone walls and the crushed condition of unburnt floorboards seemed to make the unbelievable a distinct possibility.

Reed pulled back the massive bolt of the six-o-six and nudged a round up the spout with his thumb knuckle before slamming it home. Elephants were quieter than gangsters. Quicker than gangsters. And much more dangerous.

"What do you say to that?" continued the District Commissioner who was squinting downhill to where the footprints disappeared into dead ground. But as the shreds of mist dispersed the galloping elephant appeared far out on the grazing areas below the rain forest. It was going like a double-decker bus. Reed tucked the cold round back into the magazine.

"As a matter of fact," mumbled Hector Reed, "I was thinking of resigning."

The six tribal policemen, the District Commissioner and Reed marched on dead reckoning until they arrived back at the parked bush vehicle.

"It is time I settled down, sir," said Reed.

The tribal policemen sat under the canopy. The District Commissioner sat up in front. Reed clipped the six-o-six under the dash. He crouched behind the steering wheel and coasted down the mountain in top gear until the engine fired.

"And you might find it hard to replace me," he added grimly.

Automatically on the loose pebbles of a dry bend Reed threw the vehicle into a controlled drift but financial worry made him lose touch and centrifugal force drew the vehicle out over broken ground while the patrol feverishly tried to adjust themselves to the mile-a-minute situation. The vehicle settled down in a forced landing on needle rocks and Reed hobbled away to survey the damage. His chassis was slightly twisted and the machinery inside his shin grated and scraped.

"I might find it easy to replace you," said the District Commissioner after counting the tribal policemen.

No doubt the vehicle was still drivable but it was stranded. Because of wide differences between night and day temperatures the needle rocks had contracted and expanded every twenty-four hours for several millennia. Now on this early Saturday morning they were full of cracks.

They shoved sharp stakes into the cracks and levered the rocks apart so that they fall in heavy chunky blocks. It was somewhat like dismantling a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle with the knowledge that never again this side of eternity would it be reassembled. The intricate industry of several millennia destroyed for the sake of a clapped-out government vehicle.

SATURDAY

The six tribal policemen and the District Commissioner and Hector Reed levered needle rocks apart. They manhandled the bush vehicle until it stood unstranded on flat ground again. It now stood about fifty yards off the main road. Before driving away the patrol rested.

They sat about in the strengthening sunshine on the heavy chunky blocks which had fallen from the jigsaw puzzle. They drank sweet tea from the District Commissioner's thermos flask. Neat brandy from Reed's water-bottle.

Reed hunched dispiritedly over his share of the sweet tea and flicked disconsolately at safari ants that were battling with hairs on his legs. Now and then an ant stung him. He jerked the dregs of the sweet tea on to the flat ground and was slowly getting to his feet when the District Commissioner said: "Don't move. Elephant," in vernacular.

The tribal policemen moved all right. Rapidly they became part of the shadow of the bush vehicle while Reed stood alone in the bright sunlight like a hairy-legged

banana plant dripping with sweat. One or two elevated stings betrayed the advantage gained by the safari ants in Reed's shift of attention.

"Which direction?" he inquired in a whisper.

"Don't run," murmured the District Commissioner. "Don't talk."

There was a belief that an elephant could not see you unless you moved. Reed flicked his eyes about until they rested on a climbable tree within short sprinting distance. A few burning stings registered new heights attained by the safari ants. On the ground at Reed's feet some ants attacked the evaporating dregs of sweet tea. In their effort to extract the remanent sugar they dislodged pebbles and dried twigs.

A dozen or so elephants encrusted with pink dust from the grazing areas marched past on the mountain road. Some followed the ascending mountain road and a few foraged among the trees at the roadside. As they marched they flicked at objects with their trunks. They flicked at needle rocks and at flat ground. They flicked at loose pebbles and at each other. One old lady flicked at a youngster until he behaved himself. One old gentleman flicked at the climbable tree until it disintegrated and littered the ground. Reed's legs were now trembling like dragonfly wings.

When they arrived at the half-ruined government school the elephants flicked at it with their trunks. Then they proceeded to ruin it completely. The District Commissioner quietly raised the vehicle's engine cover and did something to the starter's bendix band. The engine woke to life. The tribal policemen had already seeped in

under the tattered canopy. Presumably through the lace holes.

Up at the government school a heavy bull wheeled in their direction. He spread his ears like a tarpaulin and curled his trunk back between his eyes.

"Come on," said the District Commissioner under his breath.

Reed reacted like a released elastic band. The commissioner held open the driving door and he flew in unharmed except for a kneecap half wrenched off by the door hinge.

While the other elephants ruined the government school the bull stood guard with trunk curled high. With the engine roaring Reed swung the bush vehicle around on the flat ground so that the elephants could be watched through the side windows. If you can see elephants through your windscreen it means you are pointed in the wrong direction.

The elephants nodded at the stone walls of the government school until they toppled them. They ploughed the floors with their tusks. And they spilled floorboards as though they were matches.

The bull elephant stiffened its trunk in the direction of the roaring engine of the bush vehicle and its ears rotated like radar antennae. Long legs propelled the bull down the mountain road while Reed scrambled through the arm and leg exercises necessary to run and shunt the bush vehicle until it manœuvred on to the mountain road.

"No use building another school on that site."

"I can see your point, sir."

Reed's words squeezed out against the muscular con-

striction in his neck. The bush vehicle stalled on the steep two-foot climb on to the edge of the road. Reed tramped on the clutch pedal and the vehicle began to run backwards. He thumped his fist down hard on the yellow knob which locked the transmission into four-wheel drive. The engine was silent. He smashed the gears into lowest of the low ratio. The elephant was gathering momentum. The vehicle still rolled backwards.

"Elephants soon pick up bad habits."

"You're telling me."

"I mean they will keep coming back to the school site from habit."

"Yes, sir."

Reed had skinned the knuckles of his hand and smears of blood were making the controls slippery. He punched the starter button and miraculously the engine caught alight. He revved the accelerator pedal until the engine was screaming. He jumped in the clutch and the bush vehicle stopped rolling backwards as though it had struck a steel girder. Then, with the engine turning over at its maximum revolutions, it moved forward with enough power to push a tree over and with just enough speed to outpace a safari ant. It inched up the two-foot climb on to the mountain road in time to receive a titanic knee-kick which dislodged it a foot or two off course.

"Don't climb that tree," said the District Commissioner with an expressionless face. "It's an elephant's leg."

The elephant's trunk fell across the engine cover and the engine cover received the impression as a curved buckled trough. The elephant's finger which jutted out above the twitching nostrils touched the bright brass radiator cap

and its stinging scald brought forth a yell. It was a yell like Wagner played on fog horns in subterranean caves. It was the yell Reed had heard before from the flaming interior of the government school. The trunk descended again and the District Commissioner was nursing a blanket of fractured windscreen across his lap.

In the shudder of hesitation which occurred at the critical point where gravity no longer pulled back against the screaming engine Reed made his prestidigitary play. His foot belted the clutch pedal down and the vehicle stopped dead. His bloody hand spanked the yellow knob out of four-wheel low-ratio and the crook of his elbow dragged the gear handle into a higher gear. He allowed the clutch pedal to rise and the bush vehicle jumped down the mountain road with a few twitches and jerks. The bull elephant ran along behind for a while but it was too handicapped with power to match their speed.

"This is a bad time for elephants," said the District Commissioner, picking splinters of windscreen out of his trousers.

"You surprise me, sir," said Reed.

"I mean it is the end of the long dry. All the elephants have to come in off the plains in search of water. It means their population gets denser close in to the mountain."

Reed was in top gear now. The steering was wandering ominously but he did not relinquish speed. Dust blew up behind like a smoke screen and every bump in the road made the tribal policemen nod vigorously in unison. The canopy of the bush vehicle enclosed an atmosphere which frankly reeked of sweat. The District Commissioners' calm voice formed a reassuring bar of stability to lean on

among the boiling froth and jumping fears and jangled nerves.

The commissioner explained that elephants were very fond of kitchen salt. He spoke as though he were in a lecture theatre rather than in the gale-raked cab of a twisted vehicle. Such was their appetite for salt that elephants would excavate shallow mines in search of it. With their tongues they would polish areas of red earth just for the taste of it.

They would return seasonally to sites where they had previously tasted kitchen salt and they would dance excitedly where new traces were discovered. They would even destroy government structures in their excitement if kitchen salt was cunningly spread around by gangsters who were dedicated to the overthrow of government administration.

"Well. Strike me roan," cried Reed. He sat up stiffly, as though in a catatonic trance, for so long that the bush vehicle almost ran off the edge of the road again.

"Usually," said the District Commissioner, "I don't have such an appreciative audience."

It was breakfast time when the patrol drove back into the administrative centre. Reed hurled the vehicle on to the cement square before the club veranda where it slouched nervelessly in a larrikin attitude. The District Commissioner strode energetically into his office, scattering splinters of glass along his route, and the tribal policemen reported back at the armoury.

In the open market salesgirls were spreading their handwoven mats ready to display wares. In the street behind the circumference of whitewashed work cells the Hindoo

grocer was wrestling to open the seven assorted locks on his grocery door. When the door at last swung inwards he knelt on the threshold in prayer. After that he lit two incense sticks and waved them around his grocery as a substitute for the daily sweep-up.

"Good morning," said Reed in English to the Hindoo grocer.

"A fine morning indeed, sir," returned the Hindoo grocer.

He wore an artfully careless turban. Striped silk pyjamas and bare feet. As he spoke he pulled a three-cornered bottle of whisky out from under the counter and wrapped it in a Hindustani newspaper. Without a movement on his own part Reed found the parcel tucked under his arm.

"I say."

"Don't mention it." The Hindoo grocer raised a hand.

Reed took the parcel out from under his arm and placed it back on the counter.

"I understand", he said firmly, "that you have overcharged my grocery bill."

The grocer unwrapped the three-cornered bottle of whisky and stowed it under the counter. He was halfway through wrapping up a wrist-watch when Reed stopped him. Administrative officers were not allowed to accept presents. The rules probably dated from the period when gold-encrusted elephants were handed over to Clive of Plassy.

Together the Hindoo grocer and Hector Reed examined the grocery bill and they managed to reduce it by a shilling or two. But it made no worthwhile difference.

"Oh well," said Reed.

"Don't worry."

"What?"

"You can have your groceries free if you bring me a few sacks of maize through the cess barrier in your government vehicle."

Reed looked out through the grocery door across the open market at the flamboyant figure that had just left the District Commissioner's office. The Ostrich was not quickly recognizable in his sabbatine robes. The white folds of his neck-to-ankle smock bounced back the sunlight as his hurried strides kicked them into writhing movement. The ugly scowl on the shallow flesh of his bony face clashed with the gay design in beaded geometry which flashed around his skull cap. He stopped to question one or two salesgirls in the open market and then came striding towards the Hindoo grocery like the spirit of malevolence bent on revenge.

"What are you talking about?" Reed asked, but his eyes followed the striding figure of the Ostrich. His fingers took a grip on the edge of the counter and they gripped it far more tightly than they had to.

"I can let you have two thousand shillings. You buy maize outside Jamskoni from a merchant whom I name."

"If you give me money how do you know I won't keep it?"

"You are an honest man," said the Hindoo grocer. "I trust you."

The Ostrich was close enough now for details of his flamboyant array to be seen. He had stopped a tribal policeman and he seemed to be questioning him with

great earnestness. The ominous frown never left his scarred and shark-toothed face. Abruptly he left the tribal policeman and came on towards the Hindoo grocery, kicking up the folds of his neck-to-ankle smock more picturesquely than before.

The Ostrich was wearing a Persian waistcoat as well as the long smock and the tasselled skull cap. He wore zirkon finger-rings and silver scarab ear-bangles. Embroidered sandals jutted out intermittently from under the hem of his long smock.

Shortly Reed told the grocer that a reduced grocery bill would be of no benefit to an administrative officer imprisoned for smuggling. The Hindoo grocer smiled a suave heavy-lidded smile and there the negotiations ended.

Clenching his fists, Reed stepped out of the grocery to meet the oncoming Ostrich. Out of the incense atmosphere of snide speculation into the residual whiffs and stenches of the skeletal elephant. As he accosted the Ostrich he sneered a little impatiently.

"Where's the fancy-dress ball?" he asked.

The Ostrich swung to a halt with military emphasis. His superior height bent over the weary Reed and his bloodshot eyes squinted down from crinkled eyelids. His voice was a raucous scrape.

"What's this story about your leaving Jamskoni, old bean?"

"Now what are you driving at?" snarled Reed.

"The District Commissioner just told me. He says you are short of cash." Here the Ostrich seized Reed's shoulder and drew him closer while his raucous voice dropped to a confidential lower tone: "Look here, you bloody Austra-

lian. If you have money troubles you must let me know. I might be a lousy politician but I am thoroughly dishonest into the bargain. Any of my friends who goes short of money, old man, is just a fool. See what I mean, old man?"

Reed filled his lungs slowly and seemed to gain two inches in height.

"I am not really planning to leave," he admitted. "It was just an idea I thought better of."

The Ostrich stood staring down, speechless, for a long pause then suddenly his eyes disappeared and he displayed the double-set of white serrations on the lower half of his face. He fetched Hector Reed a clout on the shoulder which threatened to dislocate it.

"That's the stuff, old bean," he grinned. Then his scowl came back for a while: "You're not joking, are you?"

"No," said Reed. "Of course not." His voice seemed strangely excited.

The Ostrich and Hector Reed had turned now and were picking a tortuous course between the woven mats of the salesgirls. Nearby was a bride standing docilely while a retinue of hags gave a final buff to her bridal ornaments. Farther on was the grey-headed father arguing with the young buck of a groom about the bride price.

The Ostrich seemed excessively invigorated. He grinned satanically and waved his arms in exaggerated gestures.

"You'll never find a better place than Jamskoni," he cried. "Look at the people. Look at the land. This is the place for you, old bean."

"Come and have lunch with me. My vehicle is in workshops again."

"I'll run you up to your house," shouted the Ostrich. "You don't have to stand me lunch."

Reed was quite fatigued. He gritted his teeth. "That's just the kind of remark one learns to expect from people like you," he said quietly. "Don't bother. I'll walk up."

"Splendid, old man," said the Ostrich in a shout of laughter. The silver scarab bangles in his ear lobes swung and glittered. He strode briskly away and he had the large automobile waiting by the cess barrier by the time Reed had crossed the market.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," admitted Reed as he climbed into the front seat. "I just get, you know, moments of depression."

"You feel that the atmosphere is pressing you into the ground," explained the Ostrich as he gunned the automobile out of the market.

"That is roughly true."

"It is an effort to raise your chest to breathe. And you don't know where your next heart beat is coming from."

"Well," sighed Reed. "That is fairly true."

"Merely the end of the long dry, old boy," said the Ostrich. "The rains will break about four o'clock."

"Rubbish!"

The shining automobile ran hurriedly up the sides of the dead crater. Through the windscreen appeared the flawless porcelain-blue of a cloudless sky. Many of the people they passed on the roadside carried banana leaves.

As the automobile swung on to the lawn before the stone house it was noticeable that many of the khaki blotches had become considerably enlarged. Where blooming marigolds had formed a green hedge there were

now only a few withered sticks that looked like lizards and a few withered lizards that looked like sticks.

During lunch Hector Reed paid no attention to Kangai. Her tea-coloured skin had taken on a golden hint as though she had ripened somewhat since their last encounter. Her movements were satisfyingly elastic and her slender neck proudly erect resembled an elegant vase. Her eyelids fluttered like purple butterfly wings. Hector Reed seemed intent on studying the ceiling.

On the ceiling there was a good deal of unusual activity by the six-inch bug-toed skinks. Upside down and with bullet speed they jerked across a foot of ceiling in the space of time a house-fly would take to get in the air.

"Do you think", said the Ostrich, putting down his knife and fork, "that their feet move one, two, three, four or one, three, two, four? Remembering that if they trip they break their necks."

"For Christ's sake," said Reed. "If you can't get on to an adult level, why chatter?"

"Do you think", said the office boy, taking up his knife and fork and grinning hard, "that your old television colleagues would recognize you now?"

"It might surprise you to know that I gave up a profitable career in television sets."

"It's better when the long rains start," said the Ostrich.

Reed gazed out through the transparent front door. The horizon was probably seventy miles away but quite invisible. The colour of the land blended with the colour of the sky with no appreciable change in blueness. Out in that blue nothingness brown camel caravans were right now plodding out their trade routes. Dilapidated slave

markets marked the stages of incredible marching distances for chained captives. And slaves were still being bought and sold with the highest prices not for femininity but for literacy. Reliable clerks were scarce in the Arab commercial world.

"It is not the long rains," muttered Reed. "It is life itself."

And out there too, right now, were the tall red men with their wandering cattle and their respect for nothing but courage. You just stood and stood and if the lion killed you . . . well, you died. But you never stepped back. It simply wasn't done.

"Listen," said the Ostrich. "You are my friend and I shall tell you what is wrong with you. You are like a tribe of baboons, old bean."

"I am neither an old bean nor a tribe of baboons."

"Yes you are, old chap. Part of the tribe want to steal honey and part of the tribe are frightened of the bees. Part of the tribe want to cross a river into greener trees but part of the tribe are afraid of being drowned. Sometimes the tribe listen to a weak orator with a clever brain and sometimes the tribe listen to a clever orator with a weak brain. But there is no co-ordination."

"Thank you."

"The only time you get co-ordination is when all the bees attack together. And then the whole tribe manages to do the same thing at the same time. But without plenty of stings it just falls to pieces."

"Huh," said Hector Reed.

"You should have been here last year. Gangsters making raids all the time. Exactly what you need."

"As a matter of fact you are absolutely wrong."

He shivered. Suddenly he yelled for Kangai to bring the salt. And just as soon as he yelled Kangai produced the salt from behind his left ear.

"Pull yourself together, old chum," said the Ostrich.

Reed squinted thoughtfully out of the wall-sized window at the swelling uplands that culminated in Ol Skoni mountain's leaning peak. There were sacred forest clearings up there above the clouds where novice witches congregated at diabolical sabbaths to sacrifice their first-born. There were secret caverns where gangsters gathered to drink from the eyeballs of their slaughtered enemies. There were clandestine valleys where cattle thieves froze to death if itineraries were delayed. And above all that were glacier crevices large enough for elephants to freeze into fossils in them. And on top of that was the stark pure heart-tearingly lonely vertical scenery of the naked volcanic core.

Hector Reed rubbed a clammy hand across his forehead.

"Don't worry about me," he said to the Ostrich.

They finished lunch and sat outside in loll chairs under the shade of an earthenware eave. Among the withered debris of the desiccated lawn was a small dead snake on its back. Grey belly exposed to the charring sun's rays.

"Don't regret coming to Jamskoni," said the Ostrich sadly as he poured mud-dun coffee from a thin carafe into glazed bowls.

"What does it matter?" asked Reed. "What does anything matter?"

"Jamskoni matters, old bean," said the Ostrich solemnly. "Anything else is unimportant. We all know how much

we loathe it. Very few of us know how much we need it."

With his face set in thought Reed pressed his toe underneath the small dead snake and turned it over on its belly.

Chances were that the Ostrich was right. Every man needed a Jamskoni at one time or another. It was an oasis of chaos in a nebulous world. A haven of heartache in a sea of despair. A breath of insanity in a whimpering gale. . . .

Just then the small dead snake revived. It rolled over on its back and died again. Reed's hair pinched up on end.

Even though it was Saturday afternoon Hector Reed and the Ostrich went back to work at the administrative centre. There was little else to do. There was a squash court somewhere but the long dry was too oppressive for that kind of action.

The only sport that really flourished during the long dry was gangsterism. It had been introduced into Jamskoni district as a political movement which aimed at overthrowing the administration. Early on it had degenerated into armed banditry in order to gain supplies of food and money. Its popularity among respectable people had deteriorated.

It was no good pretending that gangsterism was the only important activity in Jamskoni district. Coffee production was of almost equal importance. And miraa twigs were more important than gangsterism and coffee put together.

The botanical name for miraa twigs was *Catha edulis*. Many Jamskoni people gained a living by picking miraa

twigs, tying them in bundles, wrapping them in polythene and flying them to Yemen. In their markets Yemen people bought a ton of twigs every day and even more during the Ramadhan period of fasting. The twigs it was said helped the devout to abstain from food, sex and drink from dawn to sundown during the thirty days leading to the first appearance of the sickle moon of Idd-el-Fitr.

Not the whole ton of twigs was eaten. Only the soft bark was masticated and the hard wood was discarded like the bones that had supported the defunct elephant.

The drug in the soft bark was a volatile relation of benzedrine. Some years back the women in Somaliland had said that it made old men impotent. As an immediate effect the old governor of Somaliland had banned the drug and the twigs doubled their price on the black market.

The District Commissioner explained all this during the Saturday afternoon while Reed sat in his office. Like a semaphore signaller he accompanied his explanation with bewildering spirals of gesticulation which eddied and flowed over the vast wall map. The jutting caterpillar eyebrows writhed about on top of the presbyoptic spectacles. And the climatic mugginess of the long dry gave the old face the complexion of a polished calabash.

The energies of his verbalizing flapped his sagging cheeks. But all to no avail. Reed had heard too many lectures in front of that wall map.

Nostalgically now he gazed through the District Commissioner's office window at Jamskoni salesgirls who reclined on hand-woven mats on the sandy floor of the open market. Mentally, he added swimsuits to those salesgirls

until they reminded him of sunburnt surfgirls on Bondi beach.

"You understand", the District Commissioner was saying, "that the twigs must be picked and flown overnight. Otherwise their toxic content evaporates and no one wants to buy them."

"Sir," sighed Reed, "I understand."

Beyond the nude salesgirls was the cess barrier where a grinning tribal policeman was now parleying with a busload of tourists. The tribal policeman stabbed the barrel of his regimental shotgun around to punctuate his parleying.

"More and more growers", said the District Commissioner, "run their twigs to the black market in Somaliland instead of flying them to the legal market in Yemen."

"Why, sir," yawned Reed. "That's terrible."

Several of the tourists stood up along the aisle of the bus to click cameras at the salesgirls on their mats.

"Impotency may be popular in Australia," murmured the District Commissioner. "But in Somaliland it is a disgrace."

"Hey? What's that?" Reed sat up.

"Pay attention," continued the District Commissioner. "Fewer and fewer twigs are going to Yemen. And the fewer the twigs on the legal market the smaller the revenue for Jamskoni district."

"My word, sir," Reed wiped his brow.

The tribal policeman in the strawberry sweater opened the cess barrier and stood to one side while the bus driver

drew raucous clangour from the bus engine. He rearranged the gears. Then in order to clear the road barrier by a safe margin he backed up a couple of feet.

In anticipation of progress the standing tourists in the aisle had been leaning forward like kangaroos drinking. Irresistible inertia propelled them along the aisle so that they accumulated on the driver.

Apparently unmoved by the encrusted tourists the bus driver brought the bus past the tribal policeman and on towards the cement parking square.

"Henceforth," said the District Commissioner with some emphasis, "you will handle all twigs. You must ensure that no grower hides twigs, smuggles twigs, steals twigs, or sells twigs except through Yemen."

"Of course, sir."

It simply meant belting around in ten bush vehicles simultaneously.

While the District Commissioner was speaking the engine of the tourist bus died. Soon there was a scratchy knocking at the office door.

"You will see that a planeload goes out tonight," said the District Commissioner, "and by a planeload I mean a full planeload."

"Yes, sir."

The scratchy knocking continued.

"That will be all," said the District Commissioner. He closed one file labelled "TWIGS" and Reed stood up. He opened another file labelled "TOURISTS" and Reed crept out.

As Reed crept out the bus driver crept in. Despite his modest size he supported a lion tamer's moustache and

a pith helmet. White mosquito boots and a knife in a zebra-skin sheath. He smoked with earnest desperation as though waiting for his next elephant to fall on him. He left wet footprints in the sand.

"Hoop la," yelled Reed in a kindly manner. "Will you take a gold watch and chain or a kewpie doll?"

The bus driver went through his every gesture as though it were being recorded to be used against him in a film. He put the dead end of his cigarette between his lips and held it there while his eyes looked at Reed. There was no tension in the face but the cigarette ash suddenly leaped an inch towards his lips. He narrowed his eyes. He took away the cigarette and held the pose for a while. Then he slowly exhaled grey smoke from one nostril.

"I'm sorry," he spoke calmly. "But I am a white hunter."

"This district is closed to tourists," said Reed. "Don't you know there's an uprising on?"

The white hunter went through the entire routine again. The firm lips. The thoughtful look. The leaping ash and the slow exhale.

"I'm sorry," he spoke at last. "But I lost my way."

"I know," Reed said sympathetically. "Those road barriers are so hard to see."

The tourists in the bus were watching this exchange intently. The white hunter had a role to play. A living to earn. It was part of the service.

He went in to see the District Commissioner. Reed went out to see the tourists. The tribal policeman held a bucket of foot-and-mouth prophylactic below the door-step of the bus and he made tourists step into it as they

emerged. The salesgirls on mats soon enticed tourists beyond the bucket of prophylactic.

Tracks of wet footprints could soon be seen ramifying through the open market. Displayed in the market along with the salesgirls were pots of snuff, sandals, bark for brewing, gourds and twigs. Each pot had its own personality and rickety stance. All the snuff was black with handsweat. No two sandals formed a matched pair. The elaboration on the gourds covered leaky cracks. But the miraa twigs were excellent value. Fresh and poisonous.

Many of the salesgirls were soon engaged in verbal give-and-take with the tourists. Other salesgirls looked after their babies. During the long dry Jamskoni mothers cleansed their babies by licking them like cats. Here and there in the open market the feline ablutions were being studiously performed to the accompaniment of sweet meeows from the infants.

Reed gave a brown coin with a hole in it to a nursing salesgirl and she gave him a twig from her bundle of wares. Her bundle also contained a baby so new that it had not yet darkened from the colour of warm butter to the colour of molten copper.

While Reed walked on past the potter, the snuff-seller, the sandal-maker, the brewer, the bottle-o, and the equator he ate the bark of the twig and considered its dull taste. It was rather like the perishing rind of mildewed Cheddar cheese. It dried out his mouth and stunned him nowhere.

Reed hid himself in his work cell and got on with the business of wasting his life. He attacked the drudgery of composing administrative signals while outside in the

clean sunshine millet beer ran golden out of gleaming gourds and bare-skinned salesgirls flashed smiles full of genuine teeth for no more than the price of a hemp cigarette.

By cable Reed warned Yemen to expect a planeload of twigs. By telephone he asked Jamskoni airstrip to lay on a freight plane. By walkie-talkie he instructed ten bush vehicles to lift a ton of twigs. By big buffalo-skin drum he signalled growers to pick the ton. And by cerebrum he told himself to prevent black marketeers from grabbing twigs for Somaliland. But the dullness from the taste of the masticated twig entered his skull and further work became unthinkable.

Black marketeers could not be beaten. They had big freight cars. Small planes. And enough ready cash to dispense with legality. They stuck their noses in everywhere like sandflies and you could swat one or two but what difference did it make to the swarm?

Reed played xylophone with his fountain pen on the window bars of his work cell. Across the crowded open market was the shabby bus of the white hunter. Among the haggling tourists was the raucous voice and flamboyant figure of the Ostrich. Following the Ostrich in line were his three wives, each dressed in black from the bridge of her nose to the soles of her feet. With nerve-jerking suddenness a flash of lightning split the purple air overhead. Immediately the atmosphere was no longer molten lead pressing Reed into the ground. And the task of organizing twigs became merry sport.

It was about four o'clock when raincloud in the purple air condensed off the snowtip of Ol Skoni mountain. The

distant rumble of hailstones on hillside scree trembled the air. Everywhere was the smell of dampening dust. In the ripples of air colours were more vivid. Gestures became broader. Grinning teeth leaped around in nodding heads like ivory dice in a fast game. And Reed's legs bounced him out of his work cell with unaccustomed resilience.

Tourists dug deeper into their wallets of coin. Salesgirls erected banana leaves as umbrellas so that they looked less than ever like Bondi surfgirls.

While the tourists haggled for pots, snuff, sandals, brew and metal-studded gourds Reed looked over their bus. He found that their ashtrays were impeccable chrome. Their seats were foam rubber. When he moved a handle the seat next to it rectified its posture.

But on the other hand the driver's speedo was shattered. The flange of his clutch was worn off. And when Reed pulled out the choke he threw it away.

The gaudy Ostrich was leading his wives around the open market in solemn procession. Among the brightly coloured grains and fruits his Persian waistcoat and beaded skull cap almost camouflaged him. His zirkon finger-rings twinkled in the last flashes from the suffocating sun and his silver scarab ear bangles pulled and danced at his lobes. When he saw Hector Reed he opened his grin like a grey-nurse shark.

"Muga mono," he scraped out of his dry cartilage throat, and his eyes became more bloodshot than ever.

"Greetings," said Reed in vernacular. "No troubles?"

"No troubles, master," responded the Ostrich automatically. He looked for a second at his three wives.

His three veiled wives were tapping their fingers on the

sandy floor of the open market. They were simulating the pattering of raindrops. In answer to this tapping winged termites with fat two-inch bodies emerged with much trembling in readiness for the mating flight.

One or two raindrops as big as pigeon eggs smashed on to the windscreen of the tourist bus. Reed switched the switch of the windscreen wiper but nothing happened.

"What is your news of many days?" added the Ostrich politely. He took several trembling termites from his wives and ate their fat two-inch bodies. The purple air overhead darkened a tone or two. The haggling in the market suddenly got clearer.

"My news is excellent," Reed told the Ostrich. "But . . ."

Up to this point every vernacular conversation was a chess game that opened with two standard moves. But from this point on the chess game broached possibilities whose multiplicity defied contemplation.

". . . but I need help," achieved Reed.

Where pigeon-egg raindrops fell on the ear-bangled Ostrich they dabbed his plum-grey skin with black. He stood there accumulating ivory black freckles and chewing termites.

Reed raised the bonnet of the tourist bus and touched a crinkly wire. Electrically the wire jabbed him back. Just then the windscreen wiper sighed and gestured. Raindrops glued dust down on the windscreen and the wiper spread the glue evenly.

The Ostrich leaned his hideous countenance up close to Reed and spoke in a low eager voice: "Help, eh?"

Reed groped for that crinkly wire again and yelped

when he discovered it. He closed the bonnet to insulate himself. He turned to face the silver scarab ear bangles and explained in English exactly how black marketeers could be thwarted. As he talked the raindrops increased in number and diminished in size. When Reed finished talking the Ostrich's eyes disappeared with delight.

"I can help you," said the Ostrich capturing Reed's hand.

"Praise be to Allah," Reed said, waggling his captured hand.

Reed tapped his fingers sharply on the bus horn and obediently the tourists emerged from under banana leaves in the open market. He opened the bus doors and several tourists handed him small purchases to stow on the racks. The bus swallowed up the fat bodies of the tourists. Then the Ostrich entered the bus, followed by his three wives.

When all the passengers were comfortably ensconced the white hunter came out of the District Commissioner's office and Reed accosted him in English: "Uh huh?"

"I demanded a temporary pass," said the white hunter to Reed, "and the District Commissioner gave it to me."

He poked a manila envelope towards Reed and because Reed's name was on it he opened it. The note inside said: "Evict this circus immediately."

"I better travel with you," said Reed.

For answer the white hunter pulled his mouth down. He fell into the driving cockpit. He pushed the starter button and the windscreen wiper stopped. Then the bonnet rattled with sympathetic vibrations from the clangorous engine. Raindrops sliding down the side windows changed

direction to the horizontal. The bus galloped over termites' nests on to hard wavy volcanic ash. The glistening wings of the trembling carpet of termites flowed into fleeting snowdrifts.

In spite of an opaque windscreen and a slipping clutch the white hunter's driving ironed the bush track into a tarmac highway. He adjusted speed to the wavelengths of corrugations to achieve smoothest reception. And he annihilated every puff adder on the track with a minimum of swerve.

Now and then he switched on a microphone and drew tourists' attention to the three-dimensional technicolor stereophonic animals.

"That's a big giraffe," the white hunter told the tourists. "Did you see the zebras? Have you heard the gnus?"

Reed sat on foam rubber beside one English wife who broadcast a commentary on the animal in her own life. She directed her commentary at Reed but her voice filled the bus. Her husband it seemed had cracked a matching teacup by putting it in water too hot or too cold and he (you know how stupid husbands are?) and he had said that he did not know that a matching teacup would crack if you put . . .

While she nagged the little white hunter fell silent as though he could short-circuit her spiel somewhere in his neural system; before it penetrated his consciousness. This ability of his was astonishing until it was discovered that he was in fact her cracked-teacup husband.

On the puddle-mottled roadway in the slanting late afternoon sunshine a safe crust began to form. On the climbing zigzag to a saddleback the white hunter suc-

cessfully ignored his wife's commentary and transposed his gears with the music of perceptual co-ordination. The bus engine responded with muted backfires.

As the hunter navigated across an angular defile the setting sun dabbed sideways at Ol Skoni mountain and plastered level bands of raincloud shadow across its belly. Snowfields suddenly resembled yellow beaches above the tumbling waves of purple mist. A flock of flamingoes smudged a pink patch on the mauve of a distant lake. And Mrs. White Hunter told Reed sharply that those matching teacups were a wedding present from her mother. In fact her mother had warned her husband not to put . . .

"I better drive," said Reed to the white hunter. "Because I am familiar with the crack. I mean the track."

Reed took the steering wheel in the cool of the afterglow. As night came on the safety crust on the road absorbed residual moisture and turned to slime.

At fifty on the splintered speedo Mrs. White Hunter pointed out that it was in fact on her wedding anniversary that that matching teacup was put. . . . At sixty her grammar fell apart and sentences were left unfinished. And at seventy in the darkness she fell into a strained silence. Reed drove so hard it was difficult for him to uncurl his fingers afterwards.

Far ahead a matched pair of diamond eyes glittered back at the bus's headlights. In the glare of the headlights the leopard ahead shut its eyes and was invisible. Worriedly Reed peered at the mud-streaked yellow track as it flowed like a pepped-up delivery belt into the lights and then under the bucking radiator. No leopard was discernible until it materialized a few feet in front. Then in a

blurred image of athletic ingenuity it filled the windscreen and was gone without even the whisker of a collision. But Reed was already going through compulsive avoidance procedure.

Now the brake shoes on that galloping bus were not worn equally. A stab at the footbrake meant a leap to the left. On a twisting mountain track this mechanical reflex could have been useful. But Reed was not prepared for it.

In a hairtrigger delay after the leopard's evasion Reed stabbed at the footbrake and the bus leapt to the left off the crown of the track. The track was on a downgrade. He slewed the steering wheel to the right but only the front half of the bus obeyed. They proceeded down the slippery track sideways, gouging out quantities of soft red slime like the blade of a huge bulldozer. The bus reached the point where the track turned away to one side. The bus did not deviate. Leaving tyre skids as deep as storm channels it shouldered its way into a mud drift and stopped so gently that the women among the tourists did no more than scream like steam sirens.

Reed fiddled with a loose button on the rusty dashboard. He flashed the headlights on and off several times before managing to make contact with the parking lights. To his astonishment there were answering flashes from several points in the black landscape. There were no stars visible in the overcast sky but the circular horizon sparkled with flashes from electric torches.

"Seems to me," said the white hunter with his habitual calm voice. "Seems to me we were expected."

"Well. What the hell," grumbled Reed.

From their foam-rubber seats the tourists were peering out at the electric torches apprehensively. They were bright-eyed from the recent driving demonstration.

Soon Jamskoni men came out of the opaque darkness leading strings of laden wives. The wives were carrying bundles of twigs from the afternoon's simultaneous harvest. Reed did not create a fuss.

As soon as they recognized their mistake the Jamskoni men drove their laden wives back into the blackness of the night. But then instead of dashing for obscurity they organized themselves for practical assistance.

Under the direction of a chorus leader they extricated the bus from the mud drift by singing a song. As a choir they encircled the bus and seized it with muscular hands. They applied effort through their hands at stressed syllables in their song. The tourist bus wriggled in rhythm until it was back on the crown of the track again.

Before getting back into the bus Reed spoke confidentially to the choir-leader.

"Friend," he said in vernacular. "You make black market. Jamskoni all ruin."

"I understand you perfectly," answered the choir-leader.

"Remain in peace," said Reed.

"Go in peace."

After this diversion the white hunter drove the bus. By dinner time the tourists had arrived at the inn which lay just beyond the edge of Jamskoni district.

The lifting moon refracted an orange rainbow on a distant downpour and whitened the thatched roofs of the inn. Inside the inn servants in green dresses scampered

about with dripping trayloads of beer and spirits. A huge cedar log burned in the open grate. Leopard skins sprawled over flagstone flooring and too many people danced European-style in a small clearing in the forest of dusty wickerwork furniture.

A set of drums drummed. An electric organ howled. And a sultry white girl shouted into a public address system a synchronized warning to keep offa her blue suede shoes.

Reed was on the point of congratulating himself upon finding a haven at last for his travel-tired soul when Mrs. White Hunter became visible through the haze of writhing tobacco smoke. To avoid her teacup monologue he went out to the tourist bus and took a screwdriver from the toolbox. While inside the inn tourists ate sink soup and grilled trout stuffed with paprika. Roast ribs of gazelle with yam. Guava fritters with slogged cream. Soda bread and cheese. Loquats and iodine coffee. Reed unscrewed foam-rubber seats in the bus and stacked them in the courtyard of the inn.

After dinner the white hunter and the Ostrich got into the tourist bus with Reed and they drove back into Jamskoni district. They called in at the first twig orchard and the Ostrich got out to exchange lies with the twig grower while the white hunter and Reed crouched concealed in the bus.

"Have you got good twigs in your orchard?" asked the Ostrich. The lower hem of his white neck-to-ankle smock was picking up smears of red mud but the restless silver scarab ear-bangles still sparkled prettily in his lobes.

"My twigs are as thick as my fingers," boasted the

grower. He held out his fingers and the Ostrich gave them the admiration appropriate for such huge knobby twigs.

Then the Ostrich explained that he wished to buy black-market twigs for Somaliland. He nodded at the bus to indicate his business assets. He rubbed his thumb across his fingertips to indicate ready cash.

Thoughtfully the twig grower retired into his mud-and-wattle dwelling while the Ostrich gazed admiringly at the grower's girl friend. The grower's girl friend was moulded shapefully in firm blackberry blancmange. For ear ornaments she wore sharp brass spikes which protruded sideways like the blades on Queen Boadicea's chariot wheels. Inside the bus you couldn't hear what the Ostrich was saying to her. But you could see the ear ornaments doing a lot of thrusting and parrying.

"Things are getting out of hand," whispered the white hunter. "We better show ourselves."

Reed had one eyebrow over the window-ledge of the bus.

"Wait," he said quietly. "See what happens."

"I don't like the look of this set-up."

"It's all right. The Ostrich is quite harmless."

Feminine giggles mixed with the clank of ear ornaments tinkled into a tympanic crescendo. A child in a shawl on the girl friend's back added a gurgle or two to the symphony. The girl friend was wriggling her shoulders excitedly and her blackberry blancmanges were dancing elastically. An odour of rich body-heat came from the slung shawl. The Ostrich put a bony hand on her shaven head and she bent it submissively.

Just then the twig grower hurried back from his mud-

and-wattle dwelling with a rumbling growl. He was waving one of those heavy panga-knives which was really a sword. As the Ostrich got into the bus the bus door gave him a bruise on the shoulder. As the bus retired at speed a mile or two down the slippery road the Ostrich explained that not all growers were in favour of the black market.

They called at thirty-eight twig orchards that night. Many of the twig growers wanted no black-market deals. But others could be persuaded to stack twigs in the bus. Reed did not confiscate the twigs but he explained that they were Yemen-bound. He pointed out just why black market was detrimental to Jamskoni district.

He punished nobody. The essence of an efficient district was spontaneous co-operation. And spontaneous co-operation was rarely noticeable in a punishment-ridden district.

By way of spontaneous co-operation some growers offered them refreshment. One disrespectable old grower in a sheepskin blanket gave them a calabash loaded with water-white spirit brewed from juniper berries. The Ostrich refused to drink the juniper juice but he stoked up with much bark from the cargo of twigs in the bus.

Even the calm white hunter approached the juniper juice nervously. He dipped his sheath knife into it and the sheath knife came out quite clean and much sharper.

After that the Ostrich was asked to drive while the white hunter and Reed considered the stuff in the calabash and reminded each other of their debt to the juniper berry. The Ostrich drove like a horse but he cursed like a champion rider. His face stiffened into Oriental inscrutability from the anaesthesia in the bark.

The night air was chilly but the rain-soaked twigs in the bus fermented and warmed the interior. So they drifted from orchard to orchard harvesting illegal twigs and revelling in their warmth with juniper juice and masticated bark.

At Jamskoni airstrip they transferred the cargo of twigs from the tourist bus to the freight plane. Despite the District Commissioner's injunction the plane was not really filled to capacity but it took off on schedule for the hop to Yemen. An unfilled freight plane meant reduced profits for the growers because empty space cost just as much to charter as used space.

Reed gave the tourist bus a long drink at the petrol point. At the airstrip workshops he organized new brake shoes and a second-hand unsplintered speedo. Also two new tyres and a new choke cable. He deducted the expense of rejuvenating the bus from the revenue of the night's twigs and swung the whole transaction with no more than fifteen carbon copies on the governmental form.

They drove out of Jamskoni district back to the inn in the bronze light of the sinking moon for the night was far advanced. Against the fullish moon small wispy clouds formed perfect aureoles and in the clear night sky planets beamed out as bright as gems on a worthless woman. They parked the hollow bus in the courtyard of the inn and abandoned it there.

Inside the deserted inn the huge cedar log was now white dust in the open grate. The leopard skins snored on the scuffed flagstones. The air was heavy with curdled dreams and aching hearts. And the silent instruments still threw out a lot of heat from the evening's syncopation. The

wickerwork still throbbed from the lurid conversations and laced through the whole scene was the coppery taste of old pink gins and decrepit brandies.

When they finished the juniper juice Reed set up one of the stiff leopard skins on the flagstones to demonstrate for the Ostrich a special Bondi surfboard technique. This demonstration filled the white hunter with jealousy. He stalked through the forest of wickerwork furniture and shot Reed's surfboard leopard repeatedly from cover by working the bolt of an imaginary Mannlicher rifle and saying: "Boom whang!"

Reed was working out for the Ostrich the point of balance on the surfboard leopard. But when the Ostrich expressed a desire, after another shot of bark, to wail for the while hunter the interminable verses of an Oriental lovesong, Reed resolved to lead them both to their respective beds.

Now in that inn there were rondavels for guests instead of rooms. Rondavels were igloos with walls of whitewashed mud and roofs of thatched grass. Painted on the door of each rondavel was a number and you knew who was behind that number by looking in the inn's register.

Reed looked in the register and he put the door numbers in his head. Then intrepidly he led his companions into the moonlit labyrinth of rondavels with the aim of returning the white hunter to his one spouse and the Old Ostrich to his three spice.

Perhaps it was an effect of the juniper juice. As the steak-red moon dropped lower it came to pass that a couple of hyenas pranced up from the rim of the horizon

and slashed at it till the blood ran out of claw marks in dark-red gobs.

This needless savagery distracted Reed with brain-worry as they ricocheted from rondavel to rondavel and the brain-worry joggled the door numbers in his head. With door numbers joggled in his head Reed could not be blamed for transposing husbands.

The white hunter lit a cigarette before disappearing into the black interior of one rondavel. The Ostrich flashed a farewell grin and twinkled his silver scarab ear-bangles before disappearing into another. Reed eventually located his own rondavel and embedded himself after sternly overcoming the ill-will of a python-like mosquito net.

For some hours he lay awake in a welter of worry. Far out on the grazing plains two lions yelled at each other. And in under the thatched eaves of his rondavel a weaver bird talked softly to her children.

Reed worried about the freight planeload of twigs bound for Yemen. What moral right had he to force impotency twigs on to Yemen people? What would the United Nations say if they heard of that impotency racket? Remember the resentment when Britain forced opium on to the Chinese? Would Reed get life imprisonment? Castration? Or just a decoration?

Again he yearned to return to the solid reliable career in the television-set showroom where the only threat to mental serenity was an occasional calculated courtesy from the boss.

He fell asleep eventually. At eight o'clock he wobbled into the breakfast-room of the inn. Transparent girders of morning light were driving painfully into the white

tablecloths. A couple of servants in bilious green dresses were dragging their sandals across the flagstones so that they sounded, like razor blades husking coconuts. The breakfast-room stank of fried eggs glistening in fat and the bowl of spiflicated maize in front of Reed tasted like kikuyu grass. Across the surface of the khaki tea were bright spots of floating grease. Pretty and toxic.

When Mrs. White Hunter came jauntily into the breakfast-room Reed left his spoon to drown in the milky bowl. He decided to worry about the impotency racket no longer. Mrs. White Hunter was wearing a pair of silver scarab ear-bangles. Instead of talking about cracked teacups she opened up on Arabic politics and Reed knew he could not stand it any longer.

He was not deeply interested in breakfast. He was not deeply interested in how the white hunter had passed the nocturnal hours. He hurried over to the road barrier on the edge of Jamskoni district and he bummed a lift on the first vehicle bound for the administrative centre.

SUNDAY

On Sunday morning the Jamskoni administrative centre was half-dead. The whitewashed work cells curled lifelessly around the sterile sand like the bleached vertebrae of a fossil monster. The steep sides of the dead crater lay back relaxed, waiting to be hit by the noonday heat. The transparent peals of laughter from a couple of children splashed strangely along the deserted streets and alleys of the commercial sector.

Most of the work cells were locked but, of course, the District Commissioner was on deck. He was weaving more coloured threads into the tapestry of his wall map. He gave Reed the usual lopsided grimace of salutation before turning back to his weaving. Because he held one end of a red thread in his teeth his words acquired unwonted tenseness.

"I must thank you, Reed," he gritted, "for getting those twigs away."

"Thank you, sir."

"You are free for the week-end now, you know."

"We didn't quite fill the plane," said Reed. "But we rounded up a lot of black-market stuff."

"Yes," said the District Commissioner. He coughed out the end of red thread and then pinned it down through the elevated cold forests. "I got the story from the office boy. Your friend, the Ostrich."

"My word," said Reed. "He got back early."

"Came back about half an hour ago. He has just taken his wives back to the Premji Drycleanery. Ha! There he goes now. Looks like a game of squash to me."

The downpour during the previous night had given the market sand a stippled crust which crackled pleasantly under the spinning tyres of the shining automobile. The Ostrich at the steering wheel was now a sportive college boy with a visage like a polished fuel stove. The shaven streak that formed a surrogate parting in his coir-mat hair gleamed in the moonlight. The colours of the wind-fluttering scarf which went seven times around his scrawny neck proved that he had been to Harrow or Eton or Winchester or something. He had a white sweat shirt with a green laurel wreath embroidered on the front. On top of that was a blazer with blaring stripes. Even with no company except his own, the sharpened teeth hung out in a half-grin.

"I heard there was a court somewhere," said Reed.

The District Commissioner suddenly snapped out something loudly in vernacular and the tribal policeman outside the window sprinted towards the cess barrier.

"I can get you a game."

"Well. As a matter of fact——" Reed rubbed a shaky hand across his bone-white forehead.

"Don't worry," growled the District Commissioner. "The office boy is pretty good. He played for eight years in England once."

At the sprinting tribal policeman's behest the Ostrich swung his automobile back from the cess barrier. He picked up Hector Reed who was now wearing the District Commissioner's sneakers and holding the District Commissioner's racquet which was warped and out of tune like an old violin. The cane shaft was gay with the intricate flourishes of borers and the handle looked like a badly-bandaged dressing on a festering thumb. Reed crawled stiffly into the automobile and the Ostrich leered hysterically at him as they rocketed past the cess barrier and across the rain-smoothed sand.

"This is incredibly fortuitous, old bean," burbled the Ostrich. "I want to get your opinion on my new serve."

"I notice you left that inn pretty smartly."

"Ha ha!"

The automobile skidded sideways to a halt and Reed's face momentarily crumpled into extreme ugliness. The Ostrich immediately sprang out and into the little hatch leading to the court. By the time Reed had gone through the engineering problems necessary to transfer his bodily mechanism to the court the Ostrich was lying on his shoulders on the cement floor. He was pedalling his feet up in the air while he muttered numbers to himself in strict rotation.

Evidently it would never occur to an ex-public-school boy that an Australian might not know the game. Actually Hector Reed was dynamite. He had a ragged dirty style

which never let him lose unless he particularly wished to win.

Jamskoni squash court had no roof. From the outside it looked like a desert fort for *Beau Geste*. From the inside with two grim-faced paranoiacs beating the rubber pellet into the sunlit walls it looked like a Salvador Dali illustration for T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. Occasionally a Jamskoni citizen or two gazed in on the Ostrich and Reed from the spectators' gallery. The citizens would shake their heads and wander away in amazement.

"We can't blame these people too much," observed Reed as he pinched two or three squash balls to test their ripeness. "After all. They are four hundred years behind the times."

"You mean they resemble Elizabethans?" asked the Ostrich.

Conversation was suspended while the two players warmed up. Each played badly enough to deceive no one but himself. The ball was the size of a healthy date. Inside the triangle of limpid shadow cast by one wall the ball spurted and darted like a feeding trout. But back in the cube of sunlight it caught alight like a neon tube. Sneakers whispered and guffawed on the cement floor and the volleys exploded monotonously. The rain-scoured matutinal air was a delight to breathe. And the stone walls of the court still held comforting coldness from the nocturnal hours. The Ostrich's sporadic grin distracted Reed. And Reed's khaki shirt outsighted the Ostrich.

"I mean mentally," said Reed when both players were perspiring and blowing from the warm-up. "You can serve. Here's your ball."

"Thank you, doctor," said the Ostrich. As he dished up his new serve he said: "Do you refer to their intelligence?"

The new serve jumped slowly up from the Ostrich's racquet and gained height after brushing the forward wall. It floated like a dandelion puff-ball over Reed's head and rubbed two walls delicately as it settled gingerly into the corner. Even though it had given up a lot of its momentum in friction with the walls it still managed to rise two or three inches from the floor. Reed shovelled his racquet underneath it and threw it blindly away with a two-handed shot. The heels of the Ostrich's sneakers clapped staccato on the cement floor and the impact of his forehand drive echoed around the walls.

Reed was moving up court. He dodged slightly as the ball bulleted past on his right side. He waited till it tripped daintily from behind, for his backhand. He did not turn with it. Merely waited.

"I refer to decent thinking," said Reed, hitting a filthy winner.

At least it should have been a winner. The Ostrich said nothing but he off-handedly diverted the infinitesimal rebound into a filthier winner. After that Reed refused to flick the ball across to him and he had to walk across for it.

"The acoustics are quite different from a timber floor, old chum," said the Ostrich. "Takes a while for the ears to grow accustomed to the cement."

He planted a foot in the box and served up the next puff-ball with surgical precision. Reed wriggled two feet vertically into the air and slammed the ball with the wood of his racquet so that it sliced into the side wall near the

Ostrich and then jumped to the front corner. The Ostrich made no effort to chase it.

"Sorry," said Reed.

"Bloody good shot, old bean."

"That's love-one, I take it?"

"Quite so."

During the palaver Hector Reed served quickly but he failed to strike squarely. As the squash ball receded into the sky the Ostrich took a rough compass bearing. Then the two players scrambled out through the hatch. They marched on the compass bearing and began beating the bushes with their racquets.

The Ostrich stood like a gangling axeman and took a succession of swings at the lower foliage of a bunch of tessellated bamboo while Reed bent over and worked his way backwards all the time sweeping at the crowfoot grass. By improbable chance it happened to traverse the whistling arcs of the Ostrich's racquet in much the same way that a synchronized bullet traversed the propellor blades of a wartime biplane. The Ostrich's racquet did not so much as graze him but you could see that he was in line for a hefty wallop. As soon as he became aware of the danger he had just missed Reed bent his knees and twisted the handle of his racquet so that the racquet now presented its cutting edge. Rather like a broadsword.

Now a squash racquet might look fragile but with practice one could learn to apply force to a small area with precision. Thus with the side of his racquet Hector Reed impulsively struck hard at the cane shaft of the Ostrich's swinging racquet. The result was that the Ostrich struck himself a shattering blow on the shin bone. He stopped

beating at the bamboo immediately. A drop of blood gathered in the grooved depression on his shin. He stood perfectly still like the wire frame for a plasticine model. And the grin grew on his face from a sliver of lemon peel to a solid slice of pawpaw.

"Sorry, old bean," he said. His bloodshot eyes were retreating to shelter behind his crinkled lids, under the onslaught of the encroaching grin.

"You don't fool anyone with that old bean stuff," Reed managed to spit out the last words as though trying to get rid of something noisome in his mouth.

The Ostrich's grin was now merely a shape of the mouth. The confidence behind it had drained away so it was merely a glitter of ice across an empty pond. The polished fuel stove of the Ostrich's face softened to a grey putty. His eyes opened. He seemed about to speak but he only gulped.

"You think you're great laying every woman you come across," snapped Reed. "But you don't give a damn for other people's feelings."

"Oh," croaked the Ostrich. "Oh!"

Reed walked away. He flapped his racquet at a couple of mushrooms in the turf and belted them into oblivion. He rounded the corner of the stone squash court and was striding with remarkable agility across the crater slope towards his house.

The Ostrich remained alone. His fake grin sagged into a cavernous orifice and the thin flesh on his skull-like face puckered loosely. The wide immaculate shorts looked ridiculous on the thin liquorice legs. The racquet dangled weakly from an enervated paw.

Hector Reed walked across to his stone house and spent a feverish hour trying not to watch Kangai as she floated gracefully between kitchen and living-room making preparations for the midday meal. Her palms rubbed expertly over the beaded table mats to give them final polish. Her knife sliced artistically into an avocado pear and her fingers kneaded the green flesh to aggravate its ripeness.

She drew chilled guava juice from the refrigerator and gave the kitchen stove a passing kick which enhanced its efficiency considerably. Then she tumbled the smoking rice out on to a wooden platter like a heap of dry breadcrumbs and added all the bits and pieces necessary for a piquant curry and a colourful dish.

As she worked the onion-skin windings of her saree sifted the bold strokes of the thigh-spanning letter W of her buttocks. Reed spoke to her rather sharply about the speed of her work and she began to croon a weaving chant softly to herself. The scent of dried coconut and peanuts. Eastern chutney and chopped chilli. The increasing pressure of the atmosphere as storm-clouds rolled in for another afternoon's downpour. The damp heat of the noon hour. All this served to sharpen Reed's crankiness.

When Kangai accidentally spilled frothy cold beer on to the table mats Reed exclaimed vexedly and walked out of the house leaving the curry half-finished. Kangai watched with open-eyed muteness. Reed threw a few items into a rucksack and headed up towards the bamboo forest and the turfy moorlands. At that height the gathering storm-clouds were an altitude mist condensing on his flimsy clothing.

Through the afternoon he gained height steadily. The mist dampened him. And intermittent sunlight dried him. And wherever he came across a mountain stream he blew up a few trout. Not because he wanted so many fish but because he was good at the game. And he had to do something.

The higher upstream he climbed the more trout he got even though they were smaller in size. Down on the slanting meadows below the bamboo forests he had got one or two whoppers for every blast. But up on the mountain moorlands in sight of the snowline he got plenty of tiddlers.

Because Hector Reed was an expert at blowing fish he knew what results to expect. Nevertheless, late afternoon found him staggering down again. The rucksack was neatly overloaded with small trout wrapped in fern-leaves. During the miles over the gradually declining slopes fatigue made him hate his expertness at blowing fish but habitual pride prevented him from throwing away even one small trout to lighten the load. He reached the bamboo forest on the edge of the moorlands and the altitude ache went out of his lungs. When he arrived back at the stone house he was pretty far gone with weariness. Reed uttered no word of greeting when Kangai ran out to take the rucksack off his shoulders.

It was exactly sunset and the mist was disintegrating. The cold red sun was touching the shoulder of Ol Skoni mountain. The warm yellow moon was floating on the blue remoteness of the grazing plains. Reed's stone house was painted with red sunlight on one side. And with yellow moonlight just as powerful on the other. The

climbing moon compensated for the sinking sun and the world lived on in brightness.

Inside the house the moss-green drapes were drawn over the louvred window. The living-room was drenched in cool shadows which evaporated before the kindling fire.

Reed subsided crosslegged on the zebra skin before the young fire. He took the virgin forty-four out from inside his shirt and dropped it into the elephant's foot alongside the spare kindling. He peeled off his damp shirt to let the fire get at his chilled skin.

Kangai took the trout out of the rucksack and stacked them in the kitchen refrigerator. She came out of the kitchen with a glass of brandy for Reed. She was wearing a flaring European-style skirt which rumpled loudly as she walked. She was wearing absolutely nothing else. Her feet dabbed quietly at the polished parquet. Her lips were painted clove-pink petals and she smelled remotely of old teak wood in forgotten attics.

"A fine group of trout."

"It was Allah's affair." Reed grunted sulkily.

Below the loose mantelshelf where Reed's six-o-six reposed, a heap of resinous cedar-splittings were burning like firecrackers in the Roman bridge of a fireplace. Above the mantelshelf the trapdoor which led into the ceiling was a moving picture of writhing reds caused by the waving light projected from the spitting fire. The resin from the burning cedar moved spicily through the living-room. The air dried satisfyingly and moved in towards the fire, pulled by the chimney draught. The zebra skin prickled snugly against Reed's sun-seared legs.

Kangai kneeled and curved her tea-coloured elbow forward as a support for the brandy beaker on the buffed blackwood tray. The brandy picked up reflections from the fire and sparked back. The beaker was a tall, firm brush-stroke against the soft, rounded lobes of Kangai's breasts. And the scene lived on forever among the souvenirs Reed could never discard.

Reed was still clear-headed enough to know that his sulkiness was a reflection of fatigue. Among other things.

"Tell you many time," he snapped. "Nothing bare feet. House. Dirt. Nothing polish floor."

The vernacular was ungrammatical. But the tone was eloquent. Anyway as usual Kangai giggled. And as usual Reed got worse.

Those women were all the same. While things were running smoothly they never had any expression on their faces. But as soon as a little hell was introduced they got rattled and started to giggle.

"Oh, shut up," he said angrily in English.

Kangai straightened her face into lines of sadness but involuntary giggles devoid of any mirth kept breaking through.

"Get out," yelped Reed. "Go back to your own house. And don't come back till you can dress in the gown of a servant."

Kangai released a moronic giggle and with the hem of her skirt began polishing at invisible marks on the parquet. Bent double, she stumbled about in an erratic course that led ever nearer to Reed. From the crosslegged attitude Reed got to his feet like a camel and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Out," he shouted.

He pushed her into the kitchen by the shoulders and then out at the rear door. She continued to giggle but a tear or two made glittering tracks down her warm copper cheeks.

"Lock the door," shouted Reed and he waited until she had inserted her key from the outside, turned the lock and withdrawn.

He returned to the pool of warm air near the fireplace. He lit the small carbide lamp. He reclined on his elbow on the zebra skin. And in his skull were the well-planned days of the television-set showroom. Every healthy smile was an invitation to a soft sell. Every hour of time was a moving balance at the bank. Every sliver of sex was grist for the communal conscience.

Hector Reed got to his feet with a sigh. He carried the small carbide lamp along the narrow passageway into the bathroom. Level rays of the full moon came in through the barred window and hit the tiled wall so that the bathroom was bright with reflecting moonlight. To save carbide he extinguished the lamp and set it on the medicine shelf under the barred window.

As he turned on the hot water and slipped off his boots and shorts he told himself that he should expect more gratitude from a servant like Kangai. After all she was an orphan and therefore no one had insisted that she be decently circumcised in early adolescence. Being uncircumcised she had no hope of getting a respectable man to marry her. It was darned good of Reed to have her in his house.

Reed turned off the hot tap and eased himself delicately

into the too-hot water. A good deal of his back and legs had been slightly singed by sunlight reflections off the glaciers during the afternoon's fishing. The water now bit viciously at the nerve endings in his skin.

During the lengthy experience of that delicious agony Reed thought he heard Kangai's voice once or twice in the distance with maybe the voices of others. But he was too intent on introspection to pay much attention. He gazed somewhat mesmerized at the small square trapdoor leading into the ceiling above the bath. A too-hot bath for Reed was peace of mind and peace of mind meant imminent sleep. He slept all right.

He was awakened by his own heart beats. The heart beats had been accelerated by terror. And the terror had been caused by . . . what? Reed did not know. He lay completely immobile and watched the gleam of ripples on the cold bath water caused by his heart beats echoing back and forth to infinity.

The night was still and placid. You could hear the boom of a baboon a thousand feet up the mountain in the bamboo forest. The almost supersonic twitters of the bats overhead between the ceiling and the tiled roof came to Reed with reassuring familiarity but his terror did not diminish. Because the ripples on the cold bath water bounced back from the end of the bath at exact intervals, his heart beats reinforced them so that they grew in volume and became easier to see.

Then came a sound and a sight that caused the ripples to break formation. The sound was like the rustling scrape of a cobra in a basket but it was made by a human foot on the polished parquet beyond the bathroom doorway.

The foot rested on the parquet in a patch of moonlight from the barred window while its brother swept past into solid blackness. The resting foot then detached itself from the moonlit patch and moved on in pursuit of its brother.

The feet did not belong to Kangai. The scrapes were quite different and the shapes were quite different. Reed took a deep breath in preparation for a scream. Then he froze the scream and released it silently as air between the teeth.

Kangai's foot was a sculptor's dream of elegant curves which echoed the motif of her whole body. The foot Reed had just seen by the slanting rays of the full moon was an ugly tool designed for power propulsion and armoured with scaly skin to provide sufficient carapace against the man-killing giant nettles of the bamboo forest.

What was the business all about? Reed knew the business very well. The moon's rays had been broad enough to reveal not only the feet but also the tip of a dangling panga-knife. The tip of the panga had flickered across the rays of the moon like the luminous flight of a firefly. The edge had been honed for hours on oilstone. My word said Reed to himself. This was murder.

The big trouble of course was that it was more than murder. The man with the feet was a gangster from the bamboo forest. During his training this gangster had learned not only the methods of murder but also had sworn a complicated series of oaths that wherever possible the methods of murder would be accompanied by methods of humiliating torment. The first part of the humiliating torment was usually a light panga blow across the victim's heels. With the thick heel tendons severed the vic-

tim was still more or less mobile. But remarkably handicapped.

Submerged in chilled bath water and paralysed with terror it was no good Reed telling himself that he sometimes abhorred the wretched conditions that gave rise to the retaliations of gangsters. The wrongs and rights of the present uprising were of no help in his present situation.

The thing to do was to gallop screaming out of the bathroom along the narrow passage into the living-room and grab the six-o-six rifle from the mantelshelf over the fireplace. Ah, no, no! The gangster could function far more swiftly than Reed's bath-chilled limbs. And the living-room was probably seething with other gangsters. They rarely worked alone.

Reed had always expected a visit from the gangsters and had made preparation for such a visit. But while he was horizontal in the glacial bath the preparation was of little use. He clamped his teeth together. He eased himself out of the bath.

The surface of the air cut over his skin like the frozen blade of a knife. A couple of stiffened joints cracked like revolver shots but there was no audible gangster response. The roof timbers made similar cracks as they contracted at night.

Reed took the small carbide lamp off the medicine shelf and started with fear as the corner of his eye caught a movement in the passageway. He sagged with relief. The movement belonged to the shadow of the carbide lamp which the slanting rays of the full moon had printed on the polished parquet in the narrow passageway.

A thousand feet below the house on the sandy floor of the dead crater a few elephants grumbled and the common sounds seemed to steady Reed. From the medicine shelf under the barred window he picked up an empty brandy bottle with a screw top. And the snakebite outfit.

He held the carbide lamp in his left hand. He gripped the snakebite outfit in his teeth. And with his right hand he unscrewed the top of the brandy bottle. Then he opened the carbide lamp.

Still holding the small wooden peg containing the snakebite outfit in his teeth, he poured the calcium carbide powder from the lamp into the empty brandy bottle. Even frightened as he was Reed's expertness as a fish blower functioned as a simple reflex and the dose of powder he measured into the brandy-bottle bomb was just big enough for the size of fish he was aiming at.

Soon he had the screwtop twisted tightly back on to the brandy bottle which now contained a dose of carbide powder. The door of his bedroom gave a slight squeak and the brandy bottle slipped from his fingers. With one of those blind reactions used by a cricket fielder close-up in slips Reed's right hand snapped down and caught the bottle a foot from the tiled floor in the darkness with certainly no direction from his conscious mind.

Fervently he held the brandy bottle tightly and silently a few inches above the floor. His mouth fell open in horror and the snakebite outfit fell clattering in the darkness. After that he stopped trying to be stealthy. A foot scraped quite audibly in the bedroom.

Reed whipped the brandy bottle back under his armpit.

He used both hands and ten fingers to search for the snakebite outfit. The scaly scrape in the bedroom was getting easier to hear.

Madly Reed groped. When he was on the point of giving up and pretending to be dead his two hands located the wooden peg together. His hands flicked through the convolutions that untwisted the medically-sharp steel needle and unsheathed it.

The useless part of the snakebite outfit now fell clattering on to the tiled floor. Then with the steel needle Reed made a small hole in the screwtop of the brandy bottle. Again despite his nervousness his training as an expert fish blower ensured that the hole in the screwtop was just small enough for the size of the fish he wanted.

The moonlit night was so placid and still that now together with the scraping of scaly feet in Reed's bedroom you could hear the controlled breathing of the gangster. This meant that he was becoming excited too. Luckily he did not rush into the bathroom. Like a good gangster he approached the bathroom prudently.

Hector Reed stood the loaded brandy bottle submerged on the bottom of the bath. Bubbles came up from the hole in the screwcap and they made a high-pitched gurgling as they broke the surface. Reed knew that if he stayed in the bathroom much longer he would be gurgling himself.

Naked down to the quilt-like wrinkles on his shivering skin he stepped off the tiled floor of the bathroom on to the edge of the bath. On to the window-sill. On to a high shelf whose position had been planned exactly. His hands thrown upwards raised the trapdoor half an inch in the

ceiling and looped over to clutch the edges of the loophole.

While the high-pitched gurgling of bubbles in the bath water slipped upwards an octave or two under the pressure from the brandy bottle Reed displaced the trapdoor so that it fell back on to thick felt hinges and pads. Then like a gymnast on parallel bars he propelled himself into the space above the ceiling and under the roof. He rested on a sturdy beam of timber. He dropped the trapdoor silently back into place.

Just as it was duty-bound to do, the good soldier of a brandy bottle stood to attention on the bottom of the bath. A plume of bubbles waved from its regimental cap to attract any fish that might be swimming around. As air came out from the brandy bottle to form the plume of bubbles so bath water went into the brandy bottle to damp the calcium-carbide powder.

Soon no more air was left in the bottle. But the bubbles continued to rise although now they spurted upwards like bullets. They were composed of the gas acetylene. If you could have struck a match down there that plume of bubbles would have burned under water.

For blowing fish the size of the hole in the screwtop of the brandy bottle is awfully important. If you make it too big the acetylene gas can escape too easily. And sometimes not enough pressure is built up to cause an explosion. If you make it too small not enough water gets in to help form the acetylene gas. And here again there is not pressure built up that would shatter the brandy bottle and stun every fish within fifty yards. But if you make that hole just right then the force of the exploding bottle

pushes at the water with forces that move like metal rods all pointing outwards. For water, unlike air, has no pneumatic resilience to soften the blow.

Hector Reed moved from beam to beam in the solid blackness between the ceiling and the tiled roof of his stone house. He felt the flurried air from flying bats but their twitters did not increase in volume.

He moved silently and with never a creak from the timber. He was coated with bat droppings by the time he raised the trapdoor over the living-room. He looked down at reflections of the fire embers in the polished parquet. There were no gangsters in the living-room. The trapdoor fell back silently on to thick felt hinges and pads.

Reed sat over the loophole. He lowered his bottom coated with bat droppings down into the living-room. He slipped his shoulders through. Like a resting bat he hung upside down with his knees hooked over the edge of the loophole. From this position he could look along the narrow passageway past the bathroom doorway. From this position also he could feel along the top surface of the loose mantelshelf in search of the six-o-six gun.

Nor was he too astonished to find the six-o-six missing. To get into the stone house at all the gangster must have had access to Kangai's kitchen key. Reed had to admit to himself that in fact he had done very little to earn her loyalty.

The gurgling of the brandy bottle was fainter now. Its pitch had risen urgently so that it had become an air-raid siren in a distant city. The high-pitched gurgling obliterated other sounds. It was without audible warning that the gangster's foot appeared once more in the moonlit patch

outside the bathroom doorway. Reed stopped the movement of his lungs. The pulse in his arteries shook his whole body.

Like a trout investigating a jet of bubbles the gangster padded into the bathroom. The slanting rays of the moon slid upwards along his shins over the honed-bright panga and flared off the tattered ends of a leopard skin. He was no longer visible from the living-room.

Reed put his hands outside his knees. He gripped the edge of the loophole in the ceiling, tucked his knees into his chest and straightened out so that his body hung down with a short jump from the floor. His circulation had warmed up and he felt comfortable. He landed lightly on the thick zebra skin.

On the run he seized the loose mantelshelf. He lifted it off its supporting brackets and turned it over and laid it on the zebra skin. He pushed one end of the upturned mantelshelf. With the zebra skin under it for a cushion it glided softly over the polished parquet and along the narrow passageway leading to the bathroom. Reed stopped pushing when the forward end of the upturned mantelshelf was just short of the moonlit patch in front of the bathroom doorway.

He ran back to the fireplace. He put one foot on an Egyptian pouf and the other on the mantelshelf bracket. Using a strategically-placed shelf for the next foothold he gripped the edges of the loophole in the ceiling and pulled himself up into the space between the ceiling and the roof among the flurried bats.

For three seconds the high-pitched bubbles in the bath water made no sound. Then they started gurgling again.

The gangster had picked the brandy-bottle bomb out of the bath and then replaced it. No reason to suspect that this was not a normal item of equipment for a hare-brained white man's bathroom.

When the gangster's foot appeared again in the patch of moonlight outside the bathroom doorway Reed's eyes jumped out like squash balls. He was no longer frightened. But he was impressed in advance by what was to come.

The horny foot rested in the moonlit patch while its brother foot swung out from the bathroom and into the passageway towards the living-room. To reach the living-room now, the gangster had to traverse the upturned mantelshelf. The upturned side of the broad mantelshelf was lethal with four-inch nails whose file-sharpened points reached skywards like a battalion of bayonets. The passageway was something like the bed of pain for a Hindoo fakir. Except that here the nails were somewhat wider apart and much sharper.

Because of total blackness in the narrow passageway Reed could only infer the ensuing action from the sounds that came to his nervous ears. First came the distinct twang of a bayonet that had barely scraped the bone of the gangster's heel. Then the muttered ejaculation not too loud. The clatter as the adhering mantelshelf was taken a foot into the air with the gangster's alarmed leap. And then the loud crash as it bounched off the side of the passageway and settled again on to the zebra skin. All the while the distant siren in the bathroom pleaded a sibilant warning.

The gangster had fallen and was sticking to the mantelshelf like a fly on flypaper.

In response to this clatter the kitchen door flapped open and three shadowy forms rushed into the living-room. By the glow from the dying embers in the fireplace you could see panga knives ready in their hands.

Perhaps the flypaper gangster was already out of control. Reed did not know. But he did know that at that instant the brandy bottle in the bath reached its zenith of pressure. With an explosion loud enough to leave a permanent scar on the placid surface of the night it hurled pieces of bathtub clear through the tiled walls of the bathroom so that they added to the debris now encumbering the passageway.

Despite his incredible vicissitudes the prone gangster in the passageway retained his grip on Reed's six-o-six. His network of blood-vessels were jagged on dozens of needle-sharp nails. Bleeding to death and maddened by the explosion he opened fire upon the three newly-arrived gangsters as though he had mistaken them for Reed.

One of them became silent immediately. A motionless heap on the polished parquet with a slug hole in his chest three inches wide. Another crashed about the living-room with the violent abandon of a beheaded rooster. Spraying blood into the sizzling embers of the fireplace and jerking with enthusiastic but asymmetrical eurhythmics. There was no shouting. The motionless heap had no breath. And the jerking eurhythmics had no vocal chords.

After the master explosion of the brandy bottle the shots from the six-o-six in the gangster's hands were no more than deafening. The third gangster apparently untouched by slugs from the gun catapulted himself into the wall-size window at one end of Reed's living-room.

Head first through the drawn drapes he encountered no resistance. But the thick glass louvres, edge-on, presented a hazard far greater than that which he sought to escape. And the firm iron bars outside the wall-size window stopped his trajectory completely.

Like a blowfly that could not resist the urge to reach the clear outside—perhaps maddened by fear of what was inside—the third gangster took a second dive at the louvred window. The damage he did himself was excessive even compared with the damage he did to the window.

Reed did not know who remained alive and how many slugs remained in the six-o-six. He sat shivering in the roof surrounded by flurried bats until matutinal mists rolled up from the dead volcanic crater just before sun-up.

By the mottled light of approaching dawn which came into the living-room through shredded window drapes Reed gazed down at the carnage. Dimly he could make out the crucified gangster who lay nailed to the mantel-shelf amid splintered fragments of bathtub.

The motionless heap on the polished parquet had not moved. For a time no other body was discernible. But then Reed discovered the next gangster jammed into the astonishingly narrow crevice between the heavy sideboard and the living-room wall. He reminded him of a seaside crab that had scuttled into a cranny in the hope of escaping torment.

And the last gangster was found later. He had blindly scrabbled his way out through the kitchen. He had made seven miles into the bamboo forest before death found time to deal with him. His scrambling odyssey was described in blood.

Sufficiently reassured of his own safety by the appalling scene below him Reed swung down to the parquet floor from the edge of the loophole in the ceiling. He made a gown to cover the bat droppings on his skin out of shredded moss-green window drapes.

No doubt he was glad enough to be delivered from the terror of the night but something like pity shook him as he took his six-o-six from the blood-drained hand of the crucified gangster. After all, the gangster was merely a soldier in a revolutionary movement. Reed paused a moment to think back on his courage which though ill-directed had caused him to defend his position even when he was bleeding to death.

But when Reed took the six-o-six outside and behind the red-flowering corkbark trees to Kangai's quarters all pity left him. No longer did he feel the slightest admiration for gangster courage.

He had expected to arrest Kangai for having aided the gangsters. Instead he found himself weeping briefly over the almost unrecognizable structure of a once-beautiful body. The gangsters had taken complicated oaths. They had sworn to commit humiliating torment before they murdered.

With Kangai unequivocal friend of an ungrateful Australian those hideous oaths had been fulfilled in all their anatomical incredibilities.

Shock for Reed was a kerosene fire through a smudged lifetime's memories. For a space the brightening morning took on a disjointed dreamlike quality for him. He did not get dressed because he did not know how to. He did not search for help because he did not know where to. He did

not try to survive because he did not know why to. He left the house and wandered here and there in shredded mist and burning sunshine. An errant goatherd without a flock. On volcanic slopes and desert floor. Over tufty peaks and thorn-bush flats. Certainly scraps of detail penetrated his mind but they lacked cohesion.

When the agony of sanity returned, Reed found himself standing in a rocky desert and staring hypnotized at the plight of an old ass whose brisket was being eaten out by tick birds. The tick birds few into the cavern in the ass's brisket and immediately the old ass stopped grazing on thorn bushes and galloped till the birds flew out. Motivated by those spurring beaks the old ass enjoyed a wider grazing variety than otherwise would have been possible.

Reed made his way back to the stone house and pulled on some clothes. He walked down the precipitous track and commandeered the first vehicle he came across. He turned that vehicle and drove it out over the rim of the dead volcano. A cobra lying in the road ahead spat poisonous spittle on to the windscreen and Reed saluted back in like manner.

He drove shakily up to the nine-thousand-foot contour then down over alpine meadows on to the dry bed of the ancient sea. As he approached the road barrier on the edge of Jamskoni district he cut the ignition and coasted in until the vehicle was moving slowly enough for him to abandon it.

He rested on the edge of the grey dust plain while the sun passed its zenith and the afternoon sped softly past. The intercontinental aircraft touched down briefly on its westward flight.

Among the shady roots of the baobab tree lay the old man with the wrinkled skull full of wisdom. He had adjusted his own contours to accommodate those of the baobab's roots. Reed listened to his mumblings and paid him a pice for every scrap of threadbare wisdom he produced.

The old proverb seller's words welled up cool and clear as though filtered by the dust of a million memories. Nearby where the roots of the baobab clawed thirstily at the dust a few women were filling gourds with water from the slow soak in the sand lugga.

"Enough," Reed said at last but the old man's words splashed on. The women were stopping the mouths of their large gourds with small gourds. They were hanging the loads of water on their shoulders and plodding off in a direction which looked like random. In the declining sunlight butterflies clustered in scrambled colours on the damp edge of the soak.

The old man's words were strained now. As the sun's silver flashed copper-red behind the earth's haze he became silent. Through a straggling thorn tree suddenly filigreed against the blazing west a few cumulus took on the ripened gold complexion of a wasted Jamskoni girl. High cirrus clouds formed pink transversal ripples so that the sky was the roof of a leopard's mouth.

The old man pulled his bile-coloured blanket about him. He sagged comfortably and closed his eyes.

"Wherever you be and the sun sets," he told Reed, "sleep!"

Reed paid him the last pice. He considered the scraps of wisdom which now rustled aridly in his arid mind. Two

wives were two pots of poison the old man had said. Only a fool laughed at the spear. One thumbnail would never crush a louse. It needed a brave man to make a mistake.

For the first time in Reed's Jamskoni a brisk breeze was beginning to stir. He smiled faintly. Not a firm smile but his first genuine one.

Proverbs would be the same in any culture. They dealt with the facile thrills of getting along. Attaining security. Discovering sex. Winning sustenance. All that witch-doctory.

There was never any need for proverbs to deal with the important things. Everyone had a fair idea of what it was all about. Even though no one had the means of denouncing it. It wasn't a question of whether a feed was better than a fuck or better than a fight. It was merely a question of . . . gitu githongi.

The afterglow vanished and the old man slept. The butterflies became lost in the shadow of the world and Pleiades were gold dust on Taurus. Across the dry bed of the ancient sea the evening mist curtained the hollows. On the alpine uplands the turf was white as driven sand under the hard moon. Across the shoulder of the nine-thousand-foot contour the thin air glowed with moonlight and higher still Ol Skoni mountain stood out. Behind the leaning peak of Ol Skoni the profound blue-black of the night sky formed a velvet foil for the blazing constellation of the southern cross.

Fifteen miles away on the farther shore of the ancient seabed a campfire gleamed like a diamond glint in a leopard's eye. The air became resonant with the flight of the intercontinental aircraft on its return leg. The cooling

black tarmac on the landing strip exuded a pitchy odour. And the accumulated heat of the day fled from the grey dust plain. Reed arose from the baobab roots and rubbed his skin where the bark had embossed him.

"The airline bids you a glad good evening," said the air hostess as Reed came up the ramp from the black tarmac. "And hopes you enjoy the flight."

"That's right," said Reed. "I know."

He huddled into a passenger seat in the air-conditioned aircraft and latched up his safety-belt. He peered out through the concave perspex.

The distant campfire blazed brighter now. It divided and became two headlights on an automobile which approached at meteor pace across the flat grey dust.

The headlights were brighter now and more separate. Twin suns in a blatant glare that erased the southern cross. In a tightening curve the twin suns moved. The automobile glanced into a dry controlled drift. It stopped side on to the road barrier on the murram road.

Through the rolling dust clouds kicked up by the controlled drift the lanky Ostrich came pelting across the black tarmac. His thudding footfalls were audible through the tone of the aircraft's engines. His bloodshot eyes glowed in the fields of the aircraft's lights.

Smoothly, inexorably, the aircraft began its take-off run. The Ostrich propped to a halt. He still wore the squash shorts and the gym sneakers. The concave perspex brought his face closer to Reed. He was not grinning. He was even bonier than usual. The two friendships that had melted away had taken a good deal of his flesh with them.

Reed, of course, had lost nothing. As a chip of flint from

a harsher society he had refrained from risking anything. In any case the Ostrich's fondness for Kangai made affection towards him unspeakable. And Kangai's fondness for the Ostrich made affection towards her indecent. Reed picked up a coloured magazine and turned the pages. He looked at the picture of the remarkably upholstered female who leaned against the baked-enamel door of the long low motor-car. The price was clearly marked on the motor-car.

The Ostrich's teeth still gleamed a little. Bedraggled tusks in a sagging cavern. His lower eyelids hung open as crimson ledges for his lustreless eyes. One skeletal hand raised itself slowly in farewell. The withered lips moved and the perspex stopped the words but the grief was visual.

"Ita bwega," said the Ostrich.

"Tigwa bwega," said Hector Reed.

The aircraft left the tarmac. The Ostrich receded at hurricane velocity until he was an insignificant clot among the purple shadows of a landscape under the climbing moon.

With relief in his heart of hearts Hector Reed flew back to the reliable world of salesworthy friendships and the reciprocal rationing of suburban love.

about Clive Barry

Clive Barry was born in New South Wales in 1922. During the war he served with the Australian Army spending four years as a P.o.W. in Italy. On his return to Australia he spent some time at Sydney University, and then taught English to European emigrants as they travelled out by ship to Australia. He fell in love with Africa on a visit to Mombasa, and for the present he is living in Mogadishu, where the Indian Ocean joins the shores of Somalia to his native country.

Although he admits to occasional nostalgia for the attractive north shores of Sydney Harbour, he maintains that, for the time being, Africa is the country where he can live happier and follow his interests with greater zest than anywhere else.

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